

BORDERS OF THE EXOTIC IN SVEN HEDIN'S *MY LIFE AS AN EXPLORER* THE TRAVEL MEMOIR OF AN AVANT-GARDE SCANDINAVIAN SELF-DISPLACED

Raluca Boboc

Abstract: *However repudiated or obsolete the category of exoticism has come to be when dealing with travel literature, the psychological borders of the exotic, the voice of the unknown or “the call” of the exotic remains a topic deserving attention and inviting research. Since travel literature supposes different forms of re-reading, which in its turn involves different levels of self-awareness, and much of the interest travel memoirs generate relies on mapping the mindset of the travelling writer, my article targets the awareness about this “call” of the exotic sedimented in Sven Hedin’s famous travel memoir My Life as an Explorer. It is a book intended to play the part of the bridge between 19th and 20 century travel literature in a larger project whose focus lies on questions related to self-awareness and motivation with 20th century Scandinavian writers of travel literature, in an attempt to identify the presence of a “self-displacement” dimension in their approach to travelling and to using the encounter of alterity for constructing cultural landscape in their memoirs.*

Key words: *exotic, travel memoir, self-displaced, explorer, Scandinavian*

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Bridging 19th century, whose travel writing mode was, like earlier exploration writing, infused with imperialistic values and fostering the voice of realistic observers mostly keen on documenting and classifying, and 20th century, whose change of paradigm in travel literature started with the changing role of the observer and ended with the changing of literary techniques, Sven Hedin’s famous travel memoir *My Life as an Explorer*, albeit fully belonging the former category, of exploration writing, leaves also enough room for questioning the motivations and mindset of the travelling writer. This undertaking would firstly benefit from a brief background note on the major tendencies in travel literature at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a period of transition in travel writing from several points of view.

A prolific writer of travel and exploration literature, Sven Hedin was already on the road for more than 30 years when this extensive autobiographical book came out in 1925, accounting for several expeditions to Asia undertaken by Hedin starting with 1890. Thus, a part of the exploration and travelling material the book is based on belongs to the nineteenth century, a century “to a large extent dominated by accounts of explorations to Africa, though expeditions to lesser known parts of the globe, such as the Amazon jungle or the polar regions, were also popular subjects.” (Bassnett 2003: xv). Asia is not a predilect topos in 19th century literature, but as Susan Bassnett continues in her introduction to *Routledge Encyclopedia of Travel Literature*:

Three regions have perhaps been more consistently romanticized than any others—the North and South Poles, the deserts of Arabia and Persia, and the expanse of plains and great mountain ranges of central Asia, the Hindu Kush, and Tibet. All are places where human endurance is tested to its limits; all are also places where boundaries are hard to define and where past and present are fused in the nomadic lifestyles of the inhabitants (Bassnett 2003: xv)

Another fact which is representative for the early 20th century travel memoirs is the presence of the anthropological or ethnographic field report, this being relevant for

Sven Hedin's book as well. The step in the new century is actually a period of transition, because the rise of anthropology as a separate field occurs in the beginning of the 20th century, forcing travelogues toward a state of novelization. As historian of consciousness James Clifford has noticed, "disciplinary borders are under constant negotiation, with those between literary travel and anthropological fieldwork having undergone three main stages. Until Bronislaw Malinowski published his fieldwork-based ethnographic studies in the 1920s, ethnography was but one aspect of literary travel writing." (Oxfeldt 2010: 84)

Nevertheless, Hedin's travelogue is far from delivering pure anthropological and ethnographic reports; its confessional nature makes it necessary to address it as a boundary writing between travel narratives and autobiography.

As a third observation, starting with 20th century, travel literature is no longer focused on documenting and classifying the world, turning instead to consciously personal journeys, and the increasingly subjective landscapes depicted become mostly landscapes of the mind or of the self. But before the big experiments made in literature by modernist writers whose books give priority to existential thought, being dimensioned on the axes of timelessness and utmost subjectivity, such travelogues as Knut Hamsun's *In Wonderland*, presenting the Norwegian writer's travel to the Caucasus and Baku in 1902, marks a transition period¹. It is in this transition period that Sven Hedin's travel memoir is also set, being distanced from both the plain exploration literature of 19th century and Knut Hamsun's experimental writing and travelling style.

In this context I considered looking into Sven Hedin's travel memoir as a possible missing link, almost an exploration and adventure book linking two centuries of travel writing style. This huge bridge book has almost one thousand pages and deals with the Scandinavian writer's almost 40 years spent on the roads of Persia, Central Asia, Tibet – some which were *terra incognita* at the time, because Sven Hedin lived between 1865 and 1952, had four major expeditions between 1893 and 1935 and published his comprehensive travel memoir in 1920.

However, by 1930 what was called 'discovery' was already an obsolete notion, so the questions this article addresses pertain to what Hedin's travelogue shares with each century in travel writing. And regardless of whether Sven Hedin's mindset was entirely imperialistic, does the book betray a the "call" of the exotic in any way akin to that of the later Scandinavian (modernist) self-displaced writers of travel literature?

From exotism to self-displacement

When first discussing in *Essay on exotism* (1904-1918) what later come to be discussed as radical alterity, Victor Segalen dwells extensively on the strangeness that grows the closer one gets to a foreign culture. But in order to preserve the other's eternal incomprehensibility, Segalen formulates his fundamental principle of exoticism on the recommendation of keeping the distance, alternating, getting closer to and then further from the other. Further developing his intuitions, Baudrillard later explains what makes

¹See the articles of Tom Conner and Henning Howlid Wærp on this. Conner, Tom, 2016, "Going off the Beaten Path: Knut Hamsun's Forays into Travel Writing", in *Nordlit* 38, and Wærp, Henning Howlid, 2005-2006, "Knut Hamsun as a Travel Writer: *In Wonderland*." in *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies Journal / Études scandinaves au Canada* 16, 56–64.

it possible the experience otherness, considering that “essential is not that the country itself should offer you a radical foreignness, but allow you to recover a minimum of foreignness in relation to your own origin.” (Baudrillard 2002: 69).

Beyond this longer or shorter distance to the object of the exotic and the minimal or maximal foreignness this may contain, there is however another discussion worth tackling, referring to the intensity of the call of the exotic or the power of the determination to meet otherness. Bearing in mind William Zinsser’s definition of travel literature, which is raised to literature not by what the writer brings to the place, but what the place draws out of the writer (Zinsser 2006), and having as a final target of my bigger research project questions about the mindset of the traveller and the role of the exotic or otherness in self-revelation, I went further to thinkers who addressed alterity in relation to self-revelation and finally coined the concept of *self-displacement*. In doing so, I did not primarily consider that ‘travel’ is usually associated with modernism, while ‘displacement’ is connected to postmodernism, according to how Caren Kaplan defines the two terms raising questions about their rhetorical relationship:

Travel is very much a modern concept, signifying both commercial and leisure movement in an era of expanding Western Capitalism, while *displacement* refers us to the more mass migrations that modernity has engendered. While these terms cannot be viewed as opposites, it is also impossible to see them as referencing the same sites and situations. (Kaplan 1996: 14).

Instead, I used the term *self-displaced* in an attempt to identify, among 20th century writers of travel literature, those whose effort of exploring other and most of the time, though not necessarily, far-away cultures reaches an existential dimension by its entire focus being laid on the meeting of alterity. In connection with all these writers using strategies of immersing themselves wholly in the exploration of alterity as an existential strategy of surviving, it would be of high interest to discover whether in Sven Hedin’s travel memoir, which is as far as it possibly can be from a modernist’s travelogue, there are fragments betraying the mindset of a self-displaced beyond the overall exploration dimension, targeting mostly physical discovery and great fame. When tackling issues related to the motivation of long distance and long-term travellers, much has been written about the factors and combination of factors on their agendas:

Such agendas may be the gratification of simple wanderlust or a more deliberate quest for scientific knowledge, religious enlightenment, military glory, or mercantile advancement, to name just some of the motives that drew, and still draw, people to distant lands—or they may be a combination of two or more such factors.” (Speake 2014: p.vii)

Judging by such criteria, the name of such a famous Scandinavian explorer as Sven Hedin can immediately be classified in the category of travelling motivation combining physical discovery and great fame or personal glory, as he himself declared having been inspired as a child by the return of a North Pole expedition. The drawing of maps was also a big passion of his childhood but the step from these intuitions and the interior process of assuming a destiny related to the filling of white, *terra incognita* spaces on them was something triggered by a certain ferment in his approach to the unknown world in front of him when travelling. Assuming a destiny being a matter of a

second while at the same time reflecting a long interior labour, it is strangely mirrored by the word *travel* in English, which not coincidentally, perhaps, comes from a root whose meaning involves long labour:

The word travel in English has a French origin, initially “travail” and meant – as it still does with that spelling – “bodily or mental labour or toil, especially of a painful or oppressive nature; exertion; trouble; hardship; suffering”. “Nothing about pleasure”, as Wykes rightly notices. In the past, travel was extremely painful and often unsafe. (...) Travailler came to mean “work hard” in French. English borrowed the word as “travail” and this, in turn, was used to describe a tiresome journey-travel. (Andras 2010: 160-161)

Not much has been written about the fact that travel writing may sometimes suppose the travel writer assuming a destiny and stepping into the void. Even though there are no longer white, *terra incognita* spots on the maps of the world, the step certain writers of travel literature take is still as much in the void in terms of own destiny because travelling out of the comfortable well-known home space out in to the space of the other is embraced by some as an existential strategy of surviving by the meeting of alterity. Of course, up to some extent all travel writing “exists in a dialectical relationship”, as Speake put it:

Travel writing has built into its very existence a notion of otherness.” It is premised on a binary opposition between home and elsewhere, and however fuzzy ideas of “home” might be, ideas of otherness are invariably present regardless of the ideological stance of the writer. (Speake 2014: xi)

But only some writers, whom I call *self-displaced*, give this dialectical tension the existential notes, giving it the weight of a surviving scheme, beyond all the hopelessness of a life without the challenge of difference, beyond the despair of facing the void of never meeting the novelty of otherness.

When speaking about self-displaced writers, one does not immediately or necessarily target modernist writers on account of the existential self-reflexive strain in their literature. Modernists have found their best expression in the concept of *exile*, both of the voluntary or enforced type. As it has been discussed,

Modernist literature in Europe takes place in an era of intense mobility across national and linguistic borders generated mainly by new transportation systems and a growing cosmopolitan awareness. It also takes place in the midst of wars and persecution and massive involuntary migration. Both voluntary and enforced exile have had an enormous effect on the fate of literature from the first half of the twentieth century onwards. (Olsson 2007: 735)

Since modern Western culture has been labelled by thinkers like Edward Said as the age of the refugees and of mass immigration (Said 2003), and internal exile has been analysed as a predilect state pervading all of modernism, all categories of émigrés, people banned from their native country, self-imposed exiles, or voluntary expatriates, all of which are basically modern refugees living in alien countries have made the object of many studies and of extensive research. Different from all these, self-displaced writers are travelling writers whose literary texts voice a certain awareness about their call or destiny of going out into world in order to meet otherness as a strategy of staying alive.

Of course, there is a much bigger possibility to find them among modernist and post-modernist writers, authors of inspiring self-reflective pages about highly personal, subjective journeys. But self-displaced may as well hide behind Romantic writers, just as they can range, in terms of the way they travelled, as explorers, travellers or tourists.

Distinguishing between writers of travel literature in his text *Abroad*, Paul Fussell divides the British “literary travelling” world between the two world wars in explorers, travellers and tourists, the last two categories being never knighted for their performances, even though “the strains he may undergo can be as memorable” as the first:

(...) the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity. The genuine traveler is, or used to be, in the middle between the two extremes. If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of ‘knowing where one is’ belonging to tourism. If exploration promised adventures, travel was travel because it held out high hopes of misadventures.”(Fussell 1980: 39).

Of course, self-displacement involves travelling on exterior maps and the concept of “travel” is also related to the categories of border and time or whatever makes the “assumed topography” of the world the travelling writer approaches, as James Clifford puts it in *Notes on Travel and Theory* and speaking about them entails also speaking about experimental philosophy or the national boundaries that the travelling writers crossed, as Amanda Gilroy has put it².

But all discourse about displacement in connection to home, or about center and periphery refer to pairs of concepts which Carmen Andraş considers “intrinsic in the postmodern (postcolonial) definition of travel”, and which James Clifford discards in his rejection of dichotomies for the sake of introducing a new concept for defining travel: “dwelling-in travel”, by which he refers to temporary dislocation and the absorption of a different identity as a positive metaphor of individual freedom (Andraş 2010).

Self-displacement is also a metaphor of individual freedom and of personal choice but it is not the choice of mobility which is in focus, but the choice of staying in contact with the different, of celebrating life by meeting otherness. It would perhaps be worthy to notice that displacement has many times been related to elite circumstances as Caren Kaplan notices while also reminding about the concept of unhousedness used about writers such as Nabokov, Becket or Borges (Kaplan 2010: 14). This remains to be assessed at a later state of the research about *self-displaced* writers.

² As discussed by Andraş 2010 (Clifford, James, “Notes on Travel and Theory”, in *Inscriptions*, 5. http://humwww.ucsc.edu/Cultstudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/clifford.html, respectively Gilroy, Amanda (ed.), *Romantic Geographies. Discourses of travel 1775-1844*. Manchester and New York, Manchester UP, 2000)

Bio-bibliographic notes: (re)introducing Sven Anders Hedin

For some mainly an explorer, for others a famous topographer or photographer, geographer and artist, for some a real scholar (whose interests, judging by the sample materials he brought home, started with ethnography and archaeology, went through botany, zoology, and ended with geology), for others mainly a travel writer or nothing but “an excellent cartographer with a constitution of iron” (Marchand 2015), for some a Swedish nationalist, for others “a vitalist, a self-promoting loner and a homosocial misanthrope, a man who preferred the company of his dogs and camels to that of other people.” (Marchand 2015), Sven Hedin (1865–1952) was one of the most famous Swedish personalities of all times and at the same time a controversial figure, achieving great fame for his expeditions to and books about Central Asia, Tibet, the Gobi Desert, and the Himalaya and losing it because of his friendship with Adolf Hitler. As George Kish put it, “Unlike many explorers, Sven Hedin lived a strange, epic life.” (Karan 1984), with motivations ambiguous enough to foster extreme approaches: while there are voices attempting to show that Hedin was a Nazi *avant la letter* in spite of his share of Jewish descent, exploring Tibet and Chinese Turkestan on the search after Aryan materials (Danielsson 2012), others view him just as as a man who seized his opportunities, working for whoever would pay him to travel, because it was his great ambition to be a world-renowned traveller on the order of his heroes, Henry Stanley, David Livingstone and Erik Nordenskiöld. (Odelberg 2014)

Born in February 1865 in Stockholm in the well-off family of a city architect, during a period which still was an exploration time, Sven Hedin was at very young age inspired by the return of Vega expedition from the Northeast Passage. Witnessing as a child the return of a North Pole explorer, he decided it was his vocation to fill in some of the white spaces labelled Terra incognita on different maps. But, as Bertil Häggman puts it, “Hedin was not to be a polar explorer like Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1832– 1901) whom he so admired. His name will instead be forever linked to Central Asia.” (Häggman 2003: 550)

During his university time in Uppsala, he learned several Asian languages, then made his first trip to Persia, employed as a private tutor to the children of an engineer’s family in Baku – an experience he used as a starting point for a first trip on his own in the Caucasus, Persia and Mesopotamia. Back to Europe, when he started studying geology in Berlin, he had already set as a target to research the white spots on Central Asia map.

In 1890, Sven Hedin was appointed by king Oscar II as interpreter to the Swedish-Norwegian mission and generally to represent Sweden in Persia at Nassredin Shah’s court. This second stay in Persia was followed by his most famous expedition to Central Asia, in 1895: to cross Taklamakan desert for finding the ancient cities buried in its sand. Having paid the price of some members’ death, this expedition is the one credited with the discovery of Lou-lan and Lop-nor near the Chinese border. Getting further, to Western China, Gobi Desert and India, Hedin’s second big journey (1899-1902), after which he was ennobled by king Oscar II, ended with an unsuccessful attempt to reach Lhasa, the city forbidden to foreigners, but between 1905 and 1908 Svedin was back to Tibet, exploring the Trans-Himalaya range and working on a first detailed map of the country. Back to Europe, he supported Germany in WWI and then returned to the

Gobi desert for further exploration between 1923–1925 and to western China for a scientific survey commissioned by Lufthansa between 1926 and 1927.

The fourth and last big expedition that Sven Hedin carried out took six years, between 1927 and 1933 and was commissioned by the Chinese government, having a more archeology-oriented target: to locate a number of archeological sites and a Stone Age culture in western China. This Sino-Swedish expedition was followed by two more years spent by Hedin surveying, on commission of the Chinese government, the road routes from Peking to Sinkiang. Back to Europe, he again supported Germany during World War II. Apart from being ennobled, Sven Hedin was a member of the Swedish Academy and more than ten other academies, and continued to receive many medals, awards and many honorary doctorates (in several subjects, from philosophy to economy, law and medicine) until his death of meningitis in 1952.

There is however a huge gap between the enormous attention he received during his lifetime and the very little mention of him in later years, if one does not exclude a number of articles dealing with the archaeology of the Silk Road concept and Axel Odelberg's well-researched biography *Äventyrpåriktigt: berättelsen om upptäckaren* that Sven Hedin, published in 2008. The first to blame is undoubtedly his undeniable sympathy for Imperial Germany and for Social Nationalism during the world wars, and his association with Hitler's figure. But however controversial these may be, many studies have however been published in support of his political naivete, explaining his blindness through his continuous quest after sponsors able to financially support his expeditions. A second explanation could rely on the fact that, by 1930, the whole notion of 'discovery' was becoming obsolete, so the interest for literature of discovery and exploration gradually diminished naturally. But Sven Hedin's books, especially the huge travel memoir *My Life as an Explorer*, does not easily fit in the category of exploration literature mainly interesting for the facts presented. But what is still genuinely interesting about this book?

My Life as an Explorer: the travelogue of a self-displaced

“What drew him to his vast achievements has been the subject of speculation. He wanted to be admired, yes, but he also, no doubt, had a great curiosity. Some sources suggest unhappy love was responsible.” (Hägman 2003: 550)

There was not little wondering about the motivations behind Sven Hedin's expeditions.

Published in English translation in 1925, in four volumes, *My life as an Explorer* had from the very beginning the destiny of a famous book, being later reprinted and translated into many other languages. It is of course a book of exploration rather than self-reflective writing, in which the adventure mode leaves little if any space for lyrical or contemplative passages, but there is an alien note hidden in its subjectivity. One can now and then hear a different tone interfering into the text, breaking the rhythm of action and adventure.

This was Asia! I could not get enough of the enchanting pictures! I already felt how much I would love these boundless wild lands and that during the coming years I would be drawn further and further away towards the East.³ (Hedin 1930, vol II: 32)

Predictably, many of these intermissions have to do with outbursts of joy and moments of intensity in his approach to the travelling target or are attempts to account for the travelling drive this target is inspiring him.

For the rest of my life I was stuck by the magic force emanating from the biggest continent of the world. (Hedin 1930, vol II: 45)

Perhaps a better glimpse at the psychology of the travelling author's mind is provided by the sudden awareness of his irresistible attraction to the deeper and further away deserts of Asia once the Swedish King's mission in Persia is drawing to an end. His urge to cross new frontiers of the exotic and let himself be swallowed by the unknown lands bordering the self-displaced path that so many other writers or traveller writers walked on and starting with 20th century's modernist writers of travel memoirs accounted for extensively. In front of the parting of ways he is standing by at the end of his mission in Persia, Hedin confesses himself unable to resist the temptation of going further; the end of the diplomatic mission journey could be the start of a new path, leading towards exploration on his own, and it is the moment of an existential choice:

In Teheran, I was standing by a parting of the ways. Should I be happy with all these parties, which had not left behind more than usual fireworks? Shouldn't I use this occasion instead, which had taken me so long inside Asia, to continue to the heart of the continent? Such a journey would become a worth-while preparation for bigger undertakings. My longing to push forward, step by step, to the still unknown parts of the desert region and Tibetan highlands was overpowering. (Hedin 1930, vol II: 81)

In a text otherwise written in newspaper style but flowing with epic force, the words used for revealing the travelling author's mindset are not so many and varied; they basically range from *fascination* and *longing* to *irresistible* and *overpowering*.

But the adventure, the conquest of unknown land, the fight against the impossible has a fascination drawing me with irresistible force (Hedin 1930, vol II: 143)

Nevertheless, even though not many and thorough or well literarily crafted as in travel memoirs of later years in the 20th century, such fragments play a crucial role in revealing the psychology of the travelling author. They show the existential decision of travelling further and further away slowly embraced as a life strategy and a certain awareness of an inner urge to assume this destiny. Through the call of the exotic leading towards the meeting of the other, a reading can gradually be forged of the way in which the encounter of alterity serves to the construction of the self. In this, Sven Hedin may be considered to share a certain degree of self-displacement with later writers of the 20th century.

³ All translations from Swedish in this article are mine.

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