

Teaching Swedish Folk Traditions in Romania – My Experiences as a Foreign Lecturer at Bucharest University

Ph.D. Björn Apelkvist

Abstract: The paper delivers some observations from three years of experience of lecturing in Swedish language, culture and literature at Bucharest university, drawing on intercultural perspectives in relation to the pedagogical practice, and presenting the in the Swedish folkloristic tradition important celebration of Saint Lucia, which also by practice annually is made familiar to the Romanian students of Swedish at Bucharest university.

I came to Bucharest in the autumn of 2006, and started my work as the sixth Swedish lecturer sent here by the Swedish institute, Stockholm, since the collaboration with Bucharest University - originally based on a bilateral agreement between Sweden and Romania - was inaugurated in 1995. My main task at the university is to teach Swedish language for students who follow a three year bachelor's degree philological program, without any beforehand knowledge, and with Swedish as their secondary language. The courses include also thematically oriented approaches to Swedish literature and culture, with one of the main focuses concentrated on the important folk traditions that both connect Swedish people to their ancient history, as well as present a highly living, present frame of reference that continues to bring together and form the identity of the otherwise so typically individualized, modernized, secularized and on a vast geographical area spread out Swedish population.

As a teacher 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. 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) The Swedish holidays and traditions surely reflect exactly a lot of the

"deeper philosophy" that forms the cultural unity of Swedish speakers – trying to understand the world view or attitude revealed in these traditions 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. Before I present a closer look at one interesting example of the Swedish traditions of the winter season - thus connecting to the main subject of this conference not as an ethnographic expert, but from the more general, comparative standpoint of a lecturer of Swedish language in Romania - I would like to say one or two things about my general experiences of teaching here in Romania.

In Sweden the pedagogical tradition is deeply democratic, the teachers typically form a team together with the students, the collaboration being evaluated continuously to make certain that no unnecessary hierarchical distance develops between teacher and students. The studies also typically demand a high degree of independence from the students, who for example not seldom do their examination in the form of home made exercises that are to be delivered at a certain date, and require first and foremost a self-made approach to a certain subject, rather than learning facts by heart. The lessons given may be as few as perhaps only 10 hours per week – a drastic difference to circumstances in Romania, that clearly manifests how much more independent initiative and work on your own that is demanded at Swedish universities.

Adapting from this background to the Romanian educational programs, so full of obligatory hours in class, with students never having had to rely on their own motivation and initiative power, not trained to think independently and take responsibility themselves for their studies, has surely been the hardest part for me as Swedish lecturer here. There seems to me also to be quite an unconstructive discrepancy between the strict demands on attendance in class from early morning to late afternoon, and on the other hand students trying their best to escape as much education as possible, making a sport out of not coming to school and still getting their grades in a rather infantile, gymnasium-like and highly contra-productive fashion. On the other hand, there are students who ambitiously follow their programs reaching extraordinary results apparently thanks to the filled and fixed amount of learning, that they in this from a Swedish point-of-view rather un-free way acquire.

There are also interesting differences in terms of mentality that play their role in the educational circumstance: Romanian students are not so apt to express opinions on serious matters, be it political or cultural, they seem more trained to listen to what the experts have to say – on the press conference in connection to Nobel festivity this year Herta Müller spoke about a Romania in need of a true civil society, and from the point-of-view of my experiences as a university teacher I would have to agree. Swedish people on the other hand, children of a democratic development that started in the early 19th century as a result of the vast people's movements that often were run by school teachers, in general with pleasure engage in never-ending debates about all kinds of social matters, where everyone's viewpoints is equally important and paid attention to.

There is however at the same time a spontaneous, immediate connection to real life stories, anecdotes, and informal communication in general among Romanian students, that make verbal exercises of a less pretentious fashion very dynamical and easily started up and has their language skills flowing in a way that is a wonderful contrast to the typically more restrained, controlled, self-conscious tendencies in the Swedish mentality that can make talk about more personal matters stiff and full of inauthentic clichés.

But coming now to folk traditions and more specifically those that take place during winter time, the celebration that definitely is most strikingly unique in the Swedish context is the special ceremony taking place in different forms at St. Lucia's day, on 13th of December. In the early, dark morning of that day processions of girls dressed in white, full-length chemises, for a brief but for Swedish people deeply magic moment bring light and hope and premonition of Christmas, singing some old traditional Swedish songs and holding real candles, with one of them performing as saint Lucia herself in the front, with a read ribbon around the waste symbolizing the sacrifice of this saint from Sicily of the early 4th century (who according to one legend chose to give her dowry to the poor, and was killed for this).

The tradition in its current solemn, sacral tapping has only in the twentieth century had its sudden breakthrough, but is in fact today perhaps the most vital and dear of all the traditional celebrations in Sweden. Apart from the official Lucia elected for the whole country but also in all cities and villages, Lucia ceremonies are arranged also in the homes, in schools, at working places on the 13th of December every year. In contrast to the typical private nature of traditional holidays in Sweden following the reformation in the 16th century, when in accordance with Luther the religious celebrations should be a matter for the families and close ones in exclusion, Lucia is also a

public manifestation, crossing all borders in society, connecting people when the time of year is at its very darkest, delivering a free atmosphere of stillness, goodness and harmony to everyone.

Since medieval times the day of Lucia was considered to be the darkest of the whole year, and also a day when evil spirits were thought to be especially active. Especially in the north of Sweden the day of Saint Lucia was thus associated also with Lucifer, the devil. With the introduction of Christianity - first through the Catholic Church – it became the last day before the fast before Christmas also, when everything had to be prepared for the upcoming Christmas, and so it was for centuries a day of special celebration, long before the neat and solemn processions of today started to be arranged. In fact the origin of the Lucia figure seems to be young girl performing as the young Christ child and functioning as a kind of humorous hostess for the lively and excessive partying before the beginning of fast, only later to be transformed into the sacral Lucia saint that today leads the delicate ceremony, when this German tradition came to Sweden through German people living there, and became connected with the originally quite robust celebrations at St. Lucia's day.

For my students at the university in Bucharest, Lucia in its modern Swedish form is also a tradition that they each year are able to most actively participate in, since the Swedish embassy in Bucharest by tradition arranges a Lucia celebration with students of Swedish language performing the ceremony itself. This year the event took place at Radio Romania, with some hundred guests attending, and around 15 young Lucia girls from the faculty singing the traditional Swedish songs that are connected with the celebration.

Based on a mixture of Italian and German elements, it is interesting to observe how authentically Swedish the Lucia celebration still is in its constructed, invented, almost too well arranged modern state: of the essence is the purity, simplicity, stillness and quiet *Stimmung* of it all, all typically Swedish and Nordic cultural features, and perhaps also the fact that the ceremony, although there should be some obligatory "star boys" included in a complete Lucia Procession, to such a high degree is a women's manifestation, with the girls in focus. When Erich Auerbach wrote his classical work *Mimesis*, about the depiction of reality in the whole of Western literature, he notes in the brief section about Scandinavia's foremost contribution to World literature, i.e. the significant dramatically tradition stemming from Ibsen and Strindberg, how a special, deepened attention paid to the female characters is a specific of the Nordic dramatists – and not by coincidence!

So when our most important folk tradition puts the women in the front, it is once again proof of Sweden and the Nordic countries in

general indeed being the most equal and non-patriarchal in the world, which certainly is a striking contrast to Romania and the cultures of the Balkan area in general. In most cases my young female students, not to the least those who go for a scholarship to Sweden for a semester or so, seem rather prudent towards or even repelled by the liberated, self-conducting state of Swedish women - but perhaps at least some of them get an impetus too, towards a bigger independence, freedom and responsibility, towards starting to define their own lives and making their own choices, just as saint Lucia did, and according to the tradition had to pay with her life for.

References

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