

ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

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RE-MAPPING RUNIC LANDSCAPES. AN INTRODUCTION

In his long essay on cinema, “Ballaciner” (2007), French Nobel laureate Jean Marie Le Clezio recalls his first impressions of the film *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* by Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi. As a teenager in 1953, the French writer found the newly released film in an art cinema. Later, he rented it from video-stores; the copies were such that, as he recalls, sometimes one could not see any pictures at all. The magic of the film, Le Clezio continues, begins with the text of the title and the names of the actors – all in Japanese kanji signs.¹

The reception of non-Latin alphabets and cultures is one of the great currents in European Modernist culture. Often Scandinavian, Chinese or Japanese signs are interpreted as vessels for certain powers that have been lost in European letters. Unlike the arbitrary signs the Latin alphabet uses, runic or oriental symbols are supposed to be visual representations of material objects. From August Strindberg to Herman Hesse, who was a keen amateur sinologist and whose lifelong interest in Asian culture can be easily traced in works like *Siddharta*, to Roland Barthes whose *Empire of Signs* presents a phantasmagorical description of Japanese letters as empty signs, non-Latin letters were subjects of exegetical practices that often had nothing to do with proper philology, but rather were used as tools for a critique of Western reason, logocentrism, and the supposed corruption of Western thinking.

The propositions on interpreting them are usually united by several common ideas: ancient languages are archives of imaginative forces that are not available to modern users; language as such, and especially poetic language, makes use of the archaic idea of universal resemblances with the objects of nature; and finally,

¹ J.-M. G. Le Clézio, *Ballaciner*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

letters are not only shapes, but they also radiate a certain kind of light or power that is lost in everyday communication.

In a letter from September 1896 to Torsten Hedlund, an occultist from Gothenburg, August Strindberg writes about his runic studies. Runic calendars must have been much more than calendar signs, he declares, as they belong to the same tradition as ancient mysteries, the philosophy of Pythagoras and mythological cosmogonies. Strindberg began his runic studies in 1880.² At that time, he was a good friend of Artur Hazelius, a Swedish scholar, folklorist and the founder of the Skansen and Nordiska Museet in Stockholm. Strindberg discussed his studies on runic calendars with him and later donated his manuscripts to the Nordiska Museet. Both men shared common interests: they were keen to preserve Swedish folk culture and held strongly anti-authoritarian views on history – that history could and should be viewed from the perspective of ordinary people, not the ruling classes – and, most importantly, they were both fascinated by language. Hazelius was the driving force behind the reform of Swedish orthography. Already at the Scandinavian Orthography Congress in 1869, he proposed a radical simplification of Swedish spelling. At that time, the issue was still very controversial and the Swedish Academy rejected Hazelius' propositions in the first version of *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista*, but by the end of the 19th century the new rules of spelling developed by Hazelius were gradually imposed, a process that culminated in the great reform of Swedish orthography in 1906.

As Katarina Ek-Nilsson pinpoints, in the 19th century folk culture was seen as opposed to modern industrial culture and relatively static. Thus, there must have existed a direct connection between modern folk culture and Old Norse civilisation. Hazelius' folkloristic exhibits were aimed to preserve "authentic" culture, but they became famous through a modern invention: the World Exhibitions.³

Already in the late 1870s and 1880s, Strindberg was interested in the history of Swedish culture.⁴ In 1880, he wrote in a letter to his publisher, Karl Otto Bonnier, about his plans to write a collection of essays on that topic. Between 1880 and 1882 he published a series of pamphlets called *Gamla Stockholm (The Old Stockholm)* and in 1881 he signed a lucrative contract for a popular history of the Swedish people that he later called *Svenska folket (The Swedish People)*. He

² A. Strindberg, *August Strindbergs brev. 11, Maj 1895-november 1896*, ed. T. Eklund, Stockholm: Bonnier, 1969.

³ K. Ek-Nilsson, "Bland franska bönder och Svenska Folket. Några etnologiska reflektioner över August Strindberg som kulturhistoriker", [in:] *Strindbergiana*, 22, ed. P. Stam, Stockholm: Strindbergssällskapet, 2007.

⁴ A. Strindberg, *Kulturhistoriska studier*, texten redigerad av P. Stam och kommenterad av B. Bennich-Björkman, *August Strindbergs samlade verk. Nationalupplaga 7*, Stockholm: Norstedt, 2009.

was also a founding member of the Samfundet för Nordiska Museets främjande (Society for Developing the Nordic Museum).

Cultural studies and cultural history are also an important part of his pseudo-encyclopedic work *A Blue Book* (*En blå bok*, 1907–12),⁵ in which he constantly constructs predecessors and assembles a private, partisan cultural canon built on the traditions of occult and esoteric linguistics. In the linguistic chapters of this monumental work, the invention of the past and the construction of a semi-fictional tradition of occult linguistics becomes a tool in Strindberg's war against atheism, secular civilisation and positivistic science. Strindberg's eccentric theology is an intertextual collage of the writings of Swedenborg, Goethe, Linneus, Kircher, Bacon and numerous French occultists. In his project of recovering ancient cultures, Strindberg chose both global and vernacular traditions, one of which is the exegesis of runic signs as secret codes. A long chapter of *A Blue Book* called "Om Urspråket och Babels förbistring" is devoted to non-Latin alphabets. Strindberg compares runes to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mongolian, Syrian, Japanese and Chinese signs. In runes, he writes, one can find traces of ideographic representations, which must have had other functions beyond description and communication.

Strindberg's meditations on language were the last part of his grand pseudo-scientific project that he drafted between 1890–1912. It is well known that Strindberg left fiction during the so-called Inferno Crisis. Actually, there was a second hiatus in his literary activities. Between 1909, when he finished *The Great Highway*, and his death in 1912, he devoted himself exclusively to a kind of phantasmagoric linguistic project. He published several pamphlets where he elaborated ideas on language previously presented in *A Blue Book*. However, the vast majority of Strindberg's writings on language remain unpublished.

Instead of a philological reconstruction and the description of the evolution of every tongue and its development from birth to decay that was the dominant method in linguistics since in the 19th century, particularly in Germany, Strindberg proposed a quasi-theological method. For Strindberg, the aim of linguistics was not a pure description of the grammar or phonetics; instead he wanted to grasp the divine (read: Hebrew) "root" in every single word of every language. In his manuscripts, he fabricated endless charts and glossaries comparing words from Greek, Latin, Chinese, but also German, Polish, Russian, Finnish, Swahili, Malayalam and – of course – Swedish to Hebrew.

⁵ A. Strindberg, *En blå bok. Avlämnad till vederbörande och utgörande kommentar till "Svarta fanor"*, Texten redigerad och kommenterad av G. Ollén, *August Strindbergs samlade verk. Nationalupplaga 65*. Stockholm: Norstedt, 1997; *Idem, En ny blå bok*, texten redigerad och kommenterad av G. Ollén, *August Strindbergs samlade verk. Nationalupplaga 66*, Stockholm: Norstedt, 1999; *Idem, En blå bok. Avd. 3; En extra blå bok*, Register till en blå bok, texten redigerad och kommenterad av G. Ollén, *August Strindbergs samlade verk, Nationalupplaga 67*, Stockholm: Norstedt, 2000.

Through the manipulation of words and letters from all the languages of the world, pseudo-etymological procedures and comparative studies he developed a utopian theory of a pre-Babelic, primordial language. Modern languages are corrupted, debased and fragmented, he claimed; but there must have existed an onomatopoeic language, common to all nations and built on a homology of words and things. Strindberg identified this *Ursprache* with Hebrew or some kind of forgotten proto-Hebrew. In his definition, Hebrew was not only the first language, it also possessed a certain transformative potential that brings it close to the alchemical concept of *materia* or to dreams.

It is easy to recognise the Renaissance and Baroque fantasies on the restoration of a natural universal Edenic language in his late works on language: there is a continuity in human culture; the ancient wisdom of Moses, Hermes Trismegistos, and Egyptian priests has been handed over to other peoples and cultures.

Strindberg's studies on alphabets are astonishingly similar to the ideas on language that were developed by Scandinavian philosophers of nature such as Georg Stierhielm or Johannes Bureus. Thomas Karlsson has shown how the apocalyptic-minded Bureus used runes and Old Norse themes as tools in the developing of his esoteric system.⁶ In this volume, Krystyna Szelałowska gives a short introduction to the history of Scandinavian runology, focussing on how "proper" philology (as we understand it today) emerged from occult science.

Strindberg is just one example of this neo-esoteric thinking about language. Much of the mystical, alchemical and occult tradition has been handed down to Modernist literature and art; in his latest monograph Peter Gay⁷ defines Modernism, or at least a part of it, as a heretical movement, an attempt to create an alternative to institutionalised religion. Especially the use of language, the avant-garde idea of "going down" beyond the dusty layers of everyday significance and reaching the hidden essence of the word is clearly inherited from the this tradition.

Similar ideas can be found in Gunnar Ekelöf's poetical programmes. As a young poet, Ekelöf was strongly influenced by the French surrealists and Rimbaud's ideas of the alchemy of the word. In a notebook from the early 1930s called *Tankebok*, Ekelöf developed a project of a new poetic language. The esoteric poetics of the avant-garde are included here *in nuce*. Poetic language, he claimed, should be constructed of carefully chosen elementary units, words that reflect the most fundamental ideas. Those words should be grouped in lists and re-arranged in a modern version of the ancient *ars combinatorial*.⁸

⁶ T. Karlsson, *Götisk kabbala och runisk alkemi. Johannes Bureus och den götiska esoterismen*, Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet, 2010.

⁷ P. Gay, *Modernism: the lure of heresy. From Baudelaire to Beckett and beyond*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

⁸ G. Ekelöf, *Skrifter 8, Tankesamling*, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1993.

As in many avant-garde programmatic texts, conservation and innovation coexist in Ekelöf's programme. His linguistic strategies are, exactly as in Strindberg's case, very close to the tradition established by the Swedish Gothicists, especially Georg Stiernhielm. In the 17th century, Stierhielm devoted himself to the analysis of what he called *radices* or roots. These were, of course, defined in a way that has nothing to do with the modern concepts of the sign as described by John Locke or Ferdinand de Saussure. Stierhielm decomposed language into most elementary units that he called roots. He then attributed certain qualities and powers to each of them and then tried to find those roots in different languages.

Another cultural context to be mentioned here is occult Egyptology. In the 19th century, the use of the term hieroglyph as a sign of the divine presence in nature was still common; one can find it in Balzac's *Seraphita*, Melville's *Moby Dick* or Baudelaire's essays on art. The place of linguistic discourse in this hieroglyphic universe is very different from how we position it today. Language is not an arbitrary system of signs, but a part of nature itself.

The papers presented in this volume are revised and extended versions of those presented at the Re-Mapping Runic Landscapes Conference held at the Jagiellonian University in May 2011. The meeting was jointly organized by Wojciech Krawczuk from the Department of History and Jan Balbierz from the Department of Germanic Languages. The study of runic alphabets and Old Norse writings is one of the emerging branches of Scandinavian cultural studies. Traditionally, runic alphabets were subject for linguistic research, as they give a unique chance to observe the change and development of Germanic languages. However, runic inscriptions are also of great interest to anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and literary scholars.

The first group of the papers deals with the cognitive and material archives that are the backdrop of runology. Jan Ragnar Hagland presents a case study of the early-modern use of runic signs in Norway. He focuses on a central question: has the runic tradition really been unbroken since medieval times, or are we dealing with secondary traditions, mediated by later academic culture? The paper is devoted to the re-circulation and adaptation of runes in popular culture in a small community close to Haugesand in western Norway. Runic signs were still in use here in the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. All over Norway, the people responsible for the transmission of runic scripts were shoemakers, carpenters or tailors (some of them women). Jan Hagland sees this runic grassroots movement in a broader cultural context of literacy: runes were used as a folk cryptography and as tools for literacy in schools.

Moscow-based scholar Elena Melnikova discusses runic inscriptions as attesting to the tensions between oral and written cultures in Scandinavia. Runes appeared in a culture that was exclusively oral. In the beginning, runes had mostly performative and magical functions. Runic inscriptions are documents of major transformations of Scandinavian culture. This process, Melnikova argues, finished in the 11th century. She is interested in inscriptions documenting the thresholds between oral and written cultural historiography, attempts at written memorisation. A variety of runic epigraphs can be interpreted as bearers of collective memory and witnesses to the background knowledge of northern communities.

Also, Leszek Słupecki deals with documents of literacy in medieval Europe. He compares two bodies of writing from the Hanseatic towns of Bergen and Novgorod from the period between the 11th and 15th centuries. They employed runic and Cyrillic signs, which had several common uses and sometimes narrated the same historical events.

Klaus Düwel and Yuriy Kuzmenko trace the artefacts containing runes in Eastern Europe. These were found in countries like Poland, Hungary, Bosnia, Ukraine and Belarus. Artefacts with runes include lance heads, bracelets, fibulae and oriental coins; only two of the inscriptions were carved on stones. They corroborate the sojourns of the Varangians on routes to the Greek or Arab lands, but also the presence of Scandinavians in permanent settlements (as on the Staraya Ladoga).

Dominika Skrzypek reads runic signs as the evidence of conversion from pagan cults to Christianity, and challenges the popular myth of runic signs as exclusively magical tools. From the inscriptions and visual symbols on runic stones, we learn the names of Scandinavian kings as well as their role in the Christianisation processes. A common denominator for Christian theology and Germanic pagan beliefs in Nordic countries was the preoccupation with eschatology. This obsession also had substantial linguistic consequences: the notions of an afterlife required new terms previously unknown in the Nordic languages, and therefore facilitated borrowings from Latin. A similar process can be traced much later in Bible translations where German was used as a matrix for the emerging theological vocabulary.

Wojciech Krawczuk pinpoints the need of an inventory of runic inscriptions in Poland. Krawczuk gives a short introduction to the history of the interpretation of runic documents in Poland. From the 19th century to the communist era, runology in Poland was highly politicised. Runes were often mentioned by Polish historians of the 19th century, typically in the nation-building strategies of the romantic and post-romantic period. While scholars such as Joachim Lelewel or Waclaw Maciejowski claimed the Slavic origins of runes, the sources they recalled were often highly doubtful. Still, a few “real” runic artefacts have been deposited in Polish museums: some were found on Polish soil, others imported; they are still waiting for a proper inventory.

Several other papers deal with what the British historian Eric Hobsbawm called “invented traditions”. These are practices “actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner.”⁹ Nation-building strategies in the 19th century borrowed from the storehouses of ritual and religion, and tried to create an ancient past by using forgeries, mock narratives and invented components. The fanciful theories on runic signs developed by Polish 19th century historians are canvassed in Anna Waškos’ paper. Ideas about a Slavic Arcadia – usually based on forgeries and over-interpretations of sources – flourished among archivists and historiographers of the Pan-Slavic movement. Waško gives an account of those, often implausible, propositions. For many Romantic historiographers in Poland, the runic alphabet was considered to be a Slavic invention. Similar versions of the monogenetic linguistic hypothesis flourished in other countries: the renowned scholar Jacob Grimm developed a theory of the common *Urschrift* from which glagolic and runic signs were derived. Marcin Starzyński scrutinizes the similar, quasi-mythological theories of Franciszek Piekosiński, an eccentric history professor who worked at Jagiellonian University and was one of the defenders of the Slavic runes thesis. Polish coats-of-arms, he claimed, frequently used modified runic signs that might have been introduced during the invasion of the (non-existent) Lechite tribe into the territory of what later became Poland.

Ragnhild Ljosland explores the double cultural identity of Orkney Islands. Until 1468, the islands were an Earldom of the Kingdom of Norway, and, later on, the archipelago was pawned to the Scottish king in 1468. Runic signs, Ljosland shows, are used in crafts, tourist information material, decorations and local products. Ordinary businesses, from brewers and distilleries to schools, use them in their logos. Norse inspiration is also a main theme running through Orkney literature from the Victorian era until today. Translation, imitation and adaption (like the 19th century versions of *Orkneyinga Saga* (1873) and the *Heimskringla – The Saga of the Norwegian Kings* (1844) were major tools in the process of hybridisation for a regional culture.

The conference papers delivered during the Re-Mapping Runic Landscapes Conference that we now reproduce here had a multidisciplinary aim: to show runic alphabets in a broad cultural context. They explore how runic signs functioned in the construction and invention of national traditions, how they have been used as educational tools and how they still function today in “high” and “low” culture. Our aim was to evoke different aspects and facets of contemporary culture oriented runic studies.

⁹ E. Hobsbawm, “Introduction”, [in:] *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 1.

