Geomodernism and Affect in Eyvind Johnson’s Urban North

Reflections on Stad i mörker and related novel-, travel- and memory-writing

The article is a contribution to the exploration of the role of the margins of modernity in the reconfiguration of literary articulation, critiquing a centrist perspective on the development of modernism. Participating in the re-mapping processes that inform the current, spatially inclined theorisation of modernism, the article investigates the use of Northern “off-centre” townscapes as sites for the probing of emerging modern societies and states of mind in Swedish autodidactic author (and later Nobel laureate) Eyvind Johnson’s early urban writing, with a particular emphasis on his second novel, Stad i mörker (1927). The article demonstrates how a polytopic, decentring and locational approach to the understanding of modernist topography, with “geomodernism” as one of its labels, can be utilised to unpack the ambiguous centre-periphery relationships operative in the novel at both European and local levels. In this connection the article documents the creative interface between proximate and distant place in Stad i mörker. While the novel maintains its local emplacement throughout and represents human activity as “traffic” within its townscape limits, it nevertheless lets a plurality of exterior domains and discourses related to these act on the town setting. Moreover, the article discusses the affective as well as the ideological dimensions of the “peripheral” urban environment that dominates the novel. Referencing the literary theorists Raymond Williams and Frederik Tygstrup, it is argued that Stad i mörker applies a new sociological way of seeing to its “marginal” town location, while it may also meaningfully be read in light of a new interest in affectivity as a shared and spatial phenomenon.

Key words
Geomodernism – affect and place – periphery and centre – literature of the North – Eyvind Johnson

Eyvind Johnson’s conceptualisations of the Swedish North contain an emphasis on the town, an urban dimension, which challenges perceived notions of the northern Nordic “periphery” as predominantly a domain of natural forces and resources. His earliest novels, Timans och rättfärighet (1925) and Stad i mörker (1927), are cases in point. The latter text in particular could be said to demonstrate the possibilities of a precariously positioned Northern town of moderate size to constitute a dynamic and multifocal setting for a modern narrative. Traces of these loca-
tional methods are found already in Johnson’s debut book, a collection of four shorter fictions entitled *De fyra främlingarna* (1924), which contains as its most substantial contribution a novella, “Snickarprofessor Tantalus”, that pivots on a portrayal of intellectual ambition and public opinion in a minor town environment in the North, pointing ahead, as argued by Johnson scholar and biographer Örjan Lindberger (1986: 121), to stylistic registers — and to subject-matter, we could add — in *Stad i mörker*. Johnson’s use of “off-centre” townscapes as the stage for his both formally and topically innovative probing of emerging modern societies and states of mind would seem to bear out, and could work to exemplify, current critical endeavours at re-drawing the map of modernism.

With “geomodernism” as one of its labels, recent scholarship has foregrounded the role of the margins of modernity in reconfiguring literary and artistic articulation, critiquing a centrist perspective on the development of modernism. In their introduction to a volume of essays entitled *Geomodernisms*, Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel argue that the term modernism could be broken open “into something [that may be called] geomodernisms, which signals a locational approach to modernisms” engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity’, promoting a new perspective on the evolution of modernisms “as they make themselves and are made from the outside in” (2005: 3). Doyle and Winkiel identify, moreover, “a sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion” (2005: 4) as facets of the geomodernist sensibility. Doyle’s and Winkiel’s analysis is representative of a broader spatial turn in the current theorising of modernism, prioritising and progressing, instead of the more formal emphasis of previous approaches to modernism, our understanding of the diversity, density and complexity of the engagement with place that informs modernist writing. In his study of space and geography in modernism, *Moving Through Modernity*, Andrew Thacker thus explores what he calls the polytopic quality of modernist writing, arguing that movement between and across multiple sorts of space — from the room and the street to macro geographies — is a key feature of modernism. In a similar argument, Per Thomas Andersen in a collection of essays entitled *Identitetens geografi*, focusing partly on Norwegian inter-war literature and partly on English-language postcolonial literature, presents an interesting investigation into the aesthetical manifestation of the phenomenon he terms, following the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, polygamy of place. Andersen is of the view that the plurality, or “polygamy”, of attachments to places, frequently far apart, which is a widespread human and sociological phenomenon under the current condition of globalism (Beck’s “second modernity”) has aesthetical precursors in the period of “first modernity”, more specifically in literature of the first half of the twentieth century and especially in the inter-war period. As prime Norwegian examples he cites Cora Sandel and Aksel Sandemose. Equally, the locational strategies showcased by Johnson’s early urban writing would seem to bear out Andersen’s argument. As a further example of the spatial re-orientation of theories of modernism, in this instance fully in the context of a postcolonial analysis, Michael Valdez Moses in a study entitled “Disorientalism: Conrad and the Imperial Origins of Modernist Aesthetics” argues that the prevailing perspective in literary criticism on the geographic origins of European modernism needs to be amended to take account of “the decisive contribution made by the peculiarly disorienting experiences of the modern European consciousness at the imperial periphery” (Moses 2007: 46).

Building on such decentring, polytopic and locational approaches to modernistic trajecto-
ries, I shall in the following explore the role of proximate as well as distant place in Johnson’s representation of the urban Swedish North in his second novel *Stad i mörker*, while also incorporating some comparative reference to *Timans och rättfärdigheten*. Furthermore, I shall discuss the affective, as well as the ideological, dimensions of the modern northern townscapes that Johnson presents in *Stad i mörker*. Additional occasional illumination of some of the artistic and topographical topics in question will be provided through the lenses of some of Johnson’s later travel- and memory-writing, especially texts focused on the Swedish North, where he was born and grew up. In these hybrid genres, Johnson, with his growing cultural “capital” as one of Sweden’s foremost autodidactic and modernising writers, operates as a cultural ambassador of the North, while at the same time using these mixed forms as opportunities to reflect on the relationship between his literary activity and the northern experience.

**Proximity and distance**

Johnson’s interest in the connections between the northern geographies and the workings of his literary creativity is evident in the travelogue *Vinterresa in Norrbotten*, which was published in 1955, first as a series of travel reports in the national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* and subsequently in book form by Bonniers. The travelogue opens with the approaching, by train, of Boden, Johnson’s home town in Sweden’s northernmost region of Norrbotten, followed by arrival at Luleå, the nearby regional capital located at the Bay of Bothnia, and thereafter charts a journey north-westward through the vastness of the region, primarily along the important iron ore railway line via Gällivare to Kiruna, both new industrialised towns of the North. To complete the circuit, Johnson then travels back to Boden¹ from where he departs with Stockholm as his destination, as the travel narrative closes. While passing through the landscapes of Lapland in the interior of the region, Johnson considers the criticism he has received at times in his career that he has not been faithful to Norrbotten in his writing. He does this by debating the notion of faithfulness itself, deploring the author who remains restricted to only one environment rather than availing himself/herself of the mode of distancing which, eventually, can be converted into a new kind of closeness. He goes on to document how travelling away, to continental Europe, liberated his literary engagement with the North. These and related observations seem to form part of an aesthetical credo that centres on locational cross-fertilisation, on import and export, on combinational creativity. As Johnson in *Vinterresa* returns to Boden, he reflects on the way in which street scenes and affective atmospheres originating in local Northern townscapes were transferred into texts set much further south: “Och jag minns gatustämningar som först upplevdes i Luleå, Boden eller Haparanda men som jag försökt att placera in i böcker som rör sig med betydligt sydligare trakter” (1955: 121). Complementarily, Johnson argues that if he were to venture into the difficult challenge of composing a novel centred on Boden, Luleå or other places in Norrbotten, consciously or subconsciously dimensions of other countries would slip into the text. This type of locational interchange and hybridity is summed up in the notion of a literary “växelbruk” (1955: 121), a rotational method which, in turn, is reminiscent of the confluence of proximity and distance, of “inside” and “outside”, that Doyle and Winkiel (2005: 4) identify as indicative of the geomodernist sensibility.

In *Vinterresa i Norrbotten*, Boden likewise forms the setting for reflections on *Stad i mörker* more specifically. This novel is commonly in criticism and public opinion believed to be modelled mainly upon Johnson’s hometown. Lindberger, for example, comments that “det
rör sig i Eyvind Johnsons bok inte om en gam-
mal stad utan om en ung, och det kan inte be-
tvivlas att atmosfären framför allt är hämtad från
Boden” (1986: 153). Johnson himself, however,
is more cautious about this connection, situat-
ing the topography and the topics of the text
somewhere between the local and the univer-
sal, the factual and the fictional, the novel being
about “några tänkta figurer i en påhittad, vintrig
stad” (1955: 107). In a commentary on the
view (debatable, as I shall discuss below) that the
novel paints an overly dark and negative picture
of his hometown, Johnson counters, in re-
sponse to the question of location, that, while
the narrative might be said to “visa glimtar, en
vag kontur av Boden eller kanske Luleå eller
någon annan stad i nordliga Norrland” (ibid.), it
is impossible to disentangle the exterior or for-
eign components from what he has written
with Norrbotten as its frame.

In the conditions of its creation as well as in
the complex sense of place it communicates,
Stad i mörker clearly reflects this creative inter-
face between proximity and distance which
Johnson foregrounds in Vinterresa i Norrbotten.
The novel, Johnson’s second, was written in the
first half of 1926, mainly in the small town of
Capbreton on the Atlantic coast of the south of
France, at the Bay of Biscay, before it was com-
pleted in Paris. Referring in this instance to the
Paris district of Ménilmontant where he rented
a room at the time of completion, Johnson in a
retrospective piece, “En helt liten stad”, pub-
lished in 1949 in Luleå gymnasietidning (the jour-
nal of the Luleå sixth-form grammar school),
rhetorically connects the townscapes, separated
by considerable distance, of the novel’s produc-
tion and of its content: he “satt […] i ett rum
högst upp i huset i den lilla staden och sysslade
med en bok om en annan liten stad” (1949:
16). The inclination Johnson displays in “En
helt liten stad”, and in many other memory
pieces, to invoke communication lines between
a wider geography and a northern locality on
which his writing focuses is equally manifested
in Stad i mörker itself, where it feeds into a topo-
 graphical strategy of embedment, comparison
or juxtapositioning. In other respects, however,
the novel represents a literary project that aims
to constitute and concentrate on the northern
town as a modern universe, fostering new af-
fective and ideological responses. This duality
in Johnson’s novel I shall now attempt to docu-
ment.

Centre and periphery (1):
The town in the world
While the town depicted in Stad i mörker may
seem isolated, larger coordinates impinge on it
in a variety of ways. Its ambiguous status of
both centre and periphery, of both significant
and insignificant, worthy of both celebration
and critique, is summarised pictorially in the
text. In separate chapters, which I shall now ex-
perience the novel contains two prominent epi-
isodes of mapping in which it employs a concre-
tised cartographic technique in order to let cen-
tral characters encounter and contemplate the
implications of the positioning of the town in a
larger-scale system.

In a scene set, not untypically of the novel, in
an institutional environment, in this instance
the editorial office of the local newspaper, the
acute gaze of the socially mobile and politically
ambitious manufacturer Hammar travels across
a map of Europe displayed on the office wall to-
dwards the demarcation of the northern town in
the following manner:

Det är stort, Europa, tyckar urmakarn. Han har just
inte tänkt på det förut. Tyskland, Frankrike, England,
ett stycke Skandinavien, ett stycke Ryssland. Och
gränserna förandras då och då; ljudlöst, nästan omärk-
ligt på kartan, med buller och bråk där ute. Där ute – i
[…]. Långt upp en liten prick, en liten stad. Hammar
upptäcker att den verkligen hör till Europa, är en
punkt i världen, ett centrum, kring vilket en lands-
bygd sluter sig – en kärna, ett säte – – –

“[P]rick”, “punkt”, “centra”, “kärna”, “säte”, “stad”, “by”: the poetical richness and the slip-pages of the nomenclature encapsulate the uncertain and contingent positioning of the town, which contributes to its geomodern attributes. The notion of fluid European boundaries and the journey undertaken by the protagonist’s perspective across these boundaries together enforce a sense of spatial flux (paralleled by the temporal flux achieved by the shift into the present tense during the course of the passage, a device frequently used by Johnson). The question mark following the concept of “[d]är ute” communicates, moreover, an uncertainty about being outside or inside or both at once.

The media environment that surrounds this episode of macro mapping is no coincidence, as the editorial office in which manufacturer Hammar momentarily finds himself on his own, and which provides the proximity of place that governs the composition of the novel’s chapter VI, “Mellanspel”, is at the same time conceived as a veritable communication “hot spot”, with telephone and telegraph connected to the capital and further afield intervening in the narrative with news streams conveying fragments of current international and domestic events. The breaking news items range globally from unrest in China, via dictatorship in Italy, to bank robbery in Stockholm; they even take in the cosmos, reporting the discovery of “En ny stjärna av okänd valör” (130), while also referencing, tongue-in-cheek, the novel’s own place of origin, as mentioned above, pointed to in the fragment “Storm och fiskarbåtarna gå inte ut i Biskayabukten” (130). Thus, while maintaining its local emplacement, the novel lets a plurality of exterior domains and discourses act on the town. Stylistically, the chapter is characterised by an abrupt, economical and elliptical diction, which contributes to an overarching sense of speed and modernity, with the opening, impatient onomatopoeia “Rrrrr rrrr rr rrr-rr-rr” (130) that renders the insistence of the news-line telephone developing into an acoustic leit-motif that punctuates the chapter, emphasising, additionally, the significance of modern sound, rhythm and phrasing in Johnson’s novel, paralleling developments in contemporary music and poetry. A related acoustic motif features, incidentally, in chapter II, “Februaris ansikte”, in which the representation of whispering voices as “Ssszzzzssszzz-ssschyzzzz” (39) or similar feeds into the depiction of the public violation of the post office clerk and radical local politician Miss Ågren, the novel’s female protagonist (see further discussion below).

Moving on to my second example of the role of mapping in the novel, this is taken from an earlier chapter, number III, entitled “Andersson, helt enkelt”, and centres, as its deceptively/ironically simple heading suggests, on the novel’s other male protagonist, the sceptical, philosophically inclined school teacher Andersson. The chapter contains a scene informed by an equally intense consciousness of the ambiguity of positioning as the one ascribed to manufacturer Hammar, as discussed above. In the scene in question Andersson’s gaze performs a related, albeit more surreal, and more sombre, pictorial juxtaposing of south and north on another institutional wall, this time that of the classroom. In a fashion again characteristic of its formal ambition and innovation, the text weaves patterns of motifs of light and darkness on the wall, as an affective contrast emerges between the southern sun-infused and exotic segments of the map and the blackness of the adjoining board, which appears to function as an extended mapping of the northern condition: “Där hängde kartan över Europa. Den hade ljusa partier, sydliga, bördiga länder. Nästan gua
av välmåga, platta, solbelysta ... Men i ena vrån stod mörkret som en gapande svart mun: svarta tavlan ...” (71). Thus, Andersson’s more experimental cartography seems to situate the north as a corner or periphery (rather than a heart) of darkness so extreme that it falls off and exists beyond conventional mapping.

This spatial tension between local alienation and global connection is in keeping with the emotional thrust of chapter III in its entirety, as this is composed around opposites of feelings of confinement, spleen and stagnation on the one hand and longings towards a wider world and vision on the other. It is characteristic that Andersson’s destination, when earlier in the chapter in a typical fashion he traverses the townscape, is the modern node of the railway station where he watches the long-distance train arrive and depart and studies the timetable poster with its lure of distant places and promise of geodynamics and vitality: “Landet stod inte stilla”, “Världen är full av liv” (66). In the earlier stages of the novel in particular, the school teacher, a southern incomer to the north, is conceived as a modern melancholic, isolated in his individualism and irony, regretting his career choices, and harbouring unrealised desires of Odyssean travel, as expressed in the contrast between the professions of a teacher and a sailor: “han [var] skollärar Andersson, som velat bli sjöman” (62), and in the recurring motif of the swell of waves: “Havet: det slår mot sina stränder” (55). In his monograph on Johnson’s early work and years, tellingly entitled Norrbottningen som blev europé, Örjan Lindberger connects the coastal southern environment in which Stad i mörker was conceived with the novel’s method of letting townscapes be counterpointed by seascapes: “författarens minnen från vistelsen vid havet får färga skollärarens drömmar om det ovanliga, i kontrast mot gräheten och februarkylan i stadsmiljön” (1986: 161). Lindberger goes on to argue more broadly that the novel’s contrapuntal and polyphonic method, which would become a hallmark of Johnson’s writing, and which we also saw exemplified in chapter VI and its connected media environment, may have been influenced by Johnson’s musical interests.

As for further functions of Andersson’s voice in Johnson’s novelistic symphony, it is likewise part of the school teacher’s remit to formulate the novel’s most far-reaching spatial dimension, extending deep into cosmos and other galaxies. This is the most radical articulation of the localational hybridity which, as we have seen, is a pronounced feature of Stad i mörker in a variety of ways, and of Johnson’s fiction-, memory- and travel-writing more broadly. In a key scene, in chapter I, “Symposion”, offering uninhibited night-time views into frozen space from the vantage point of the town hotel balcony in connection with the celebrations of the town’s twenty-fifth anniversary depicted in the chapter, Andersson introduces a “deep” spatial and temporal measurement – “millioner stjärnor i ett ändlöst rum”, “tusentals år i en ovis framtid” (28) – against which the morality, or lack of morality, of politics should be assessed, according to the teacher: “Evigheten överlämnar [politikern] till partiet, och partiet överlämnar den oftast åt – evigheten” (28). This ideological macro measurement frames the novel’s subsequent, much more close-up, town-orientated critique of the machinations of impure politics, a topic I shall develop below. The novel’s cosmic outreach finds, finally, a further form of expression in the recurring references to the expansive spectacle of the northern light whose wild and fluctuating dance above the small human settlement captures the specific northern atmosphere of the environment while it may also be seen as symbolising the exposure of the town to the world (this type of scenery figures, moreover, as the cover illustration of the first edition of Stad i mörker).
Centre and periphery (2):
the town as world

While Johnson’s novel in these and related ways communicates the contingent and precarious position of the town in a wider geography or cosmos, it aims at the same time to construct the northern town as a complex and proximate literary universe in its own right, with its own inbuilt centre-periphery problematics, and with affective and ideological investments of its own. On this level, the town itself carries in the text the status and terminology of cosmos, with the movement of people in the townscape being presented, for example, as “planeternas gång i stadens öde rymd” (95), in keeping with a cohesive rhetorical tendency in the novel towards foregrounding the town as agent, as atmosphere, as adversary, as common collective condition. While the town life depicted in *Stad i mörker* has traditionally been interpreted almost exclusively in terms of stasis, suffocation and spleen (cf. our discussion of Andersson’s responses and feelings above), it additionally reads as a domain of constant mobility, nascent modernity, political conflict, and of new interpersonal constellations and affective bonds. In regard to delivering innovative spatial articulation of subjective as well as communal topics, the novel works to demonstrate that an off-centre and smaller-scale setting is capable of matching the metropolitan environment typically associated with modernism. With the 1920s post-war climate of ideological fission, but also of societal progress and economic growth as its period frame, the novel sets out to employ the town as a continuous stage for a contemporary drama.

This is a somewhat different spatial strategy from the one that informs Johnson’s previous novel, *Timans och rättfärdigheten* — otherwise related to *Stad i mörker* in a range of respects — which includes a relatively extensive section set in Berlin (Johnson 1925: 43–64), the post-and inter-war European cultural metropolis par excellence. A key compositional and thematic device in *Timans och rättfärdigheten* is to let ideological oppositions explicitly encountered and formulated in the vibrant and inflamed debating climate of Berlin be subsequently enacted in the “remote” northern town. This novel thus arguably represents, in terms of the relationship between the off-centre locale and modernist articulation, an intermediate stage or a stepping-stone towards the full, almost programmatic, centring on the “periphery” as the privileged (albeit embedded as demonstrated above) place of action, affective atmosphere, ideological enquiry, and artistic innovation found in *Stad i mörker*. The spatial difference between the two novels regulates, moreover, aspects of character mobility and character connectivity in the two texts. In *Timans och rättfärdigheten*, the social conditions and ideological battle lines of Berlin are experienced during a formative stay in the city by one of the novel’s protagonists, a younger, reluctant, member of the northern manufacturing dynasty it focuses on, while two of its additional characters — a Berlin pacifist ideologue, Fritze, and the novel’s working-class protagonist and employee at the Timans factories – become connected by various motifs (such as illness) and beliefs. In *Stad i mörker*, by contrast, no such international interchange in the operation of characterisation seems permitted according to its “rules” of direct engagement with place. Indeed, none of the actors in its urban drama are allowed to leave the town, although they may at times harbour desires or even plans to do so. It is indicative of this type of locational limitation in the novel that, towards the end of the narrative, when manufacturer Hammar’s son is about to go abroad — in a case of a representative of a new generation being disenfranchised from or dissenting against the values of the industrial organisation he is intended to inherit that has obvious parallels with that of the Timan dynasty — he drowns close to his departure in a wake in the ice on the outskirts of the town, literally
swallowed up by the powers of nature that operate on the margins of the urban environment. This is a clear concretisation of narrative limits, with the accident contributing, moreover, to an overarching sense in the novel of the town as proximate “destiny”.

Developing our argument, even, indeed not least, the reluctant figure of Andersson contributes to the realisation of the modernist potential of locational limitation in Stad i mörker. At the same time as the teacher dreams of escaping what he perceives as the entrapment caused by the town, thus participating in the, significant, centrifugal drift of the novel’s imagination, as discussed above, he contributes equally, as a modern literary figure of doubt and shifts, temptation, resistance, and concluding “affective turn” towards the town (see further discussion in the final section of the article), to the renewal of the depiction of the very townscape he initially despises. An important element of this renewal is constituted by his recurring and apparently aimless but acutely observed meanderings through the town in the modernist metropolitan mode of, for example, Knut Hamsun’s Sult (with the protagonist of which Andersson also shares, when indoors, the emblem of the solitary rocking chair …). And Andersson is by no means alone as a character in Johnson’s novel in being delineated through the method of repeated mobility by foot within the streetscapes of the town; rather, this type of mobility seems to function as a unifying or levelling force, and the foundation for the development of affective bonds, within the novel’s character collective. Thus, the growing ambition and activity level of Andersson’s apparent adversary, the upwardly mobile manufacturer, likewise finds expression in increased engagement with the topography of the town: “Och så tog Hammar promenader. […] Han utvecklades; han blev en man på väg” (79), while the two protagonists’ gradually developing conversational partnership and eventual friendship is similarly enacted primarily via their accidental encounters when walking the streets. As for further forms of street-walking, also the locality’s more marginalised existences, in particular the prostitute Venus, are included in the novel’s conspectus of the human condition represented as townscape traffic. As suggested by her name, Venus’s knowledge of people’s planetary movements in the town space is considerable. To a higher degree than any institutionalised body, she represents from her peripheral positions in shadows and doorways a morally uncorrupted embrace of the town: “Hon kände staden utan att utnyttja sin känsdom för illvilliga ändamål”; “[m]oraliskt sett stod hon högt över staden” (96).

The notion of the town as a modern system of mobility and interconnections is summed up metaphorically in Stad i mörker by the repeated representation of it as a mechanism, a machinery and, coloured by manufacturer/watchmaker Hammar’s mindset, as a clockworks. While some of the novel’s social critique is invested in these symbolic structures – the town as an amoral force (“En stad har inget hjärta, ingen själ: den är en mekanism” (62)) and politics as a closed and self-perpetuating system (“staden styrdes av en mekanism, det gick av sig självt” (63)) – the machine metaphors simultaneously imbue the town with connotations of a (literary) site firmly rooted in twentieth-century modernity (cf. the periodization in the novel of the local/national turn into the “machine age” as a recent occurrence, as conveyed in the formulation “efter sekelskiftet och maskindustriens födelse” (13)).

As for public sector and early welfare development, and political intrigue in this societal context, Stad i mörker similarly constructs its “marginal” town setting as a microcosm of modernity. The novel explores in its town drama how (local) politics and its attendant power game are played out, using as a main plot motor the marginalisation and eventual demise of a progressive female politician and tracking the
effects of this “casual”, but possibly implicitly instigated, “vacancy” on collective and individual behaviour, Hammar’s in particular (this is in principle, incidentally, not dissimilar to the key compositional device in J. K. Rowling’s 2012 novel entitled *The Casual Vacancy*). On this level, Johnson’s novel inhabits the linguistic landscapes of phenomena such as “stadsfullmäktigeval” (22), “skattetaxeringar” (224), “barnkrubba” (22), “brandstod” (224), “folkbibliotek” (23), “stadspark” (9) and “vattenledningsfrågor” (224), excelling in introducing modern political, welfare and infrastructural terminology into literature, with its discourse at times resembling a hybrid between “concrete” poetry and social commentary.6 Like so many aspects of *Stad i mörker*, the development of its political town drama is clearly predicated on concepts of centre and periphery. Johnson designs the drama in order to critique a centrist ideology of place and value that posits an elevated, and regulated, core of power, prestige and correct behaviour and an “outlying” sphere of transgression and low esteem (with attributes of life and death, even, being incorporated into the construction of the contrasting positions).7 Manufacturer Hammar and Miss Ågren are employed to embody opposite movements in regard to these posited positions.

Hammar, on the one hand, is set on a trajectory that will, it seems, eventually take him to the town’s “high” centre (and more specifically and immediately a seat on the town council) towards which his dreams are targeted: he longs to become “en av dem, som stodo medelpunkten av allt liv i staden nära” (21). Towards the end of the novel, Hammar even conflates himself with the town as such: “det är som man själv vore stan” (208). In contrast, Miss Ägren, the novel’s proponent of gender equality, combat of child poverty through welfare provision, and the inclusion of green spaces and aesthetic consideration in town development, is the victim of a smear campaign that moves her from influence to isolation and, ultimately, death. Her alleged transgression, in the hostile, and politically motivated, assessment of the intense collective gaze, during the town’s celebratory party is the beginning of her downfall, with the public opinion’s underlying binary ideology of an orderly and transparent topography of appropriate behaviour and an opaque immoral domain outside this evident in the following passage:

I ett städat samhälle, där vägarna gå raka i det klara ljuset från många seende, och där var och en stakat ut sin lilla kvadrat, att hålla sig inom, där får en fröken, icke lägga armen om en gift man. Visserligen lade fröken Ågren icke armen om Hammers hals, men det uppfattades så. Hon var den enda kvinnan här, som haft röst och energi att göra sig politiskt eller åtminstone kommunalt gällande i staden, och när hon visade ringaste tecken till svaghet, måste hon falla. (20)
nädde ögonen precis upp till den klara delen av rutan, och under jämn februaritemperaturen, såg fröken Ågren endast ögon, och däröver olikfärgade vintermössor" (33–34). As the chapter progresses, and Miss Ågren’s consciousness approaches its collapse, the oppressive dimension of the town’s communal mentality is increasingly figured as a grotesque, collective body – “en orolig grå klump” (51) – with multiple feet, heads and, not least, eyes.

The chapter in question exemplifies how Johnson in Stad i mörker is capable of letting the specific phenomenology of the northern town environment feed into the representational and formal innovation that informs the novel throughout. The aim of creating locational atmospheres is as important to the text as any social critique when capturing the concreteness of the northern "sensescapes", with acoustic motifs, always pronounced in Johnson’s writing, as evident as visual ones, as in this streetscape: “Björkalléerna stodo stela och överrinnade, och då och då föll en kvist, klingade, bröts av för ingenting och fick bli liggande. Alla ljud hängde ekande och klara kvar länge i luften, som var grön av ilsken kyla” (88–89).

Town and affective turn

In a section, entitled “Cities of Darkness and of Light”, of his seminal study of paradigms in the representation of urban and rural spaces through literary history, The Country and the City, Raymond Williams identifies tensions in the understanding of the urban environment in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century novel-writing that are of relevance to key concerns in Stad i mörker. While Williams tends to take his examples of urban representation from texts focused on large cities, he recognises that there is a wide range of variation in types and sizes of places which can fall under the heading of urban settlements. Broadly speaking, Williams argues that over time a paradoxical mixture of positive and hostile associations has gathered on the urban environment. In the period, more specifically, of industrialisation and democratisation, these tensions acquire a stronger sociological dimension. On the one hand, Williams argues, urbanisation and the mechanisation of labour seem to function as a motor for social atomism, separateness and estrangement; on the other hand, the concentration of people in towns and cities, in work and living places, represents a process of “aggregation” that offers possibilities of new forms of human solidarity and affective relationships developing. This explains why, in the literary responses to the modern urban condition, “elements of rejection” can be combined with “elements of acceptance” (Williams 1975: 263). Williams goes on to document how contrasting images of the darkness and light of the city became established tropes for its tensions in literary and social thought during the course of the nineteenth century, while a new sociological way of seeing came to characterise the urban novel from around the turn of the century. Ideologically, the progressive aspect of the modern urban environment includes in Williams’ understanding its ability to generate new democratic forms and ideas, among which he counts, importantly in relation to Stad i mörker, the emergence of cultures of town politics and channels for the furthering of welfare development: “There was the active growth of municipal as well as metropolitan culture: the struggle for new amenities – the libraries and the institutes – in the new needs of the towns” (Williams 1975: 287).

The concluding sections of Stad i mörker represent a poignant articulation of the possibilities for new human solidarity and affect developing within the town environment, as argued by Williams. The novel’s penultimate chapter, “Och klockorna slå ...”, contains a complex perspective on the ambiguous relations, increasingly fluid boundaries and gradually devel-
oping sympathy between the subjectivities of Andersson and Hammar, manifested, again, not least while the protagonists are walking through the townscape and during the close encounters this entails. At the same time as Andersson continues to feel morally repelled – and personally challenged in what seems to him to constitute a power struggle between the two men – by Hammar’s social and political “climbing” (the examination of the role of the streber in society was central to Johnson’s motivation for writing the novel), the personalities of the two men begin to show similarities and merge into each other in arresting ways, as if “attracted” to each other and affectively coordinated. Andersson’s ambivalences vis-à-vis the watchmaker could read as an embodied variant of the combination of hostile and positive associations connected with the urban environment in Williams’ argument, especially as Hammar proclaims in the sequence in question that he feels like a town himself or wishes to become a town (237; cf. citation in the previous section of the article), demonstrating how Johnson’s modernist modes in Stad i mörker include intricate mirror effects between the representation of space and subjectivity. During the course of a few pages of the sequence, Andersson’s attitude to Hammar shows a considerable degree of slippage and development. It begins with outright antagonism and competition: “Du klättrar, du klättrar, Hammar. […] Tänker du regera mig. Tänker du verkliga regera mig. […] Inte är du någon gud” (234). It continues with a mixed sense of overwhelming closeness, merger and consequent curiosity: “Men Hammar ville åt hans hjärta, han ville ha det för stans räkning, för sin egen, för den kalla vinterns. Hammar ville i honom . . . Vem är du då, urmakare?” (237–238). And it reaches a temporary conclusion with a formulation of the possibility of a common course and a dialogic companionship: “Är du på samma väg, urmakare? Tänker du så? […] Men jag vill tala [echoing Hammar’s emphatic “Jag vill tala!” (237) a little earlier], förstår du inte at jag vill tala! […] Varför skall du fråga mig, är jag någon man kan fråga? Ge mig ett svar i stället, urmakare” (238). Thus, the chapter explores the emergence of signs of solidarity, friendship, attraction or, in Williams’ term, “aggregation”, between “accidental” inhabitants of the same urban space. The development of the relationship between the two protagonists could additionally be read in the light of Judith Butler’s recent discussion, although not specifically connected to the urban environment, of what she calls the predicament of bodily proximity, its unwelcome effects as well as its potential for the fostering of human responsiveness, both of relevance to life in Johnson’s urban geographies:

That the body invariably comes up against the outside world is a sign of the general predicament of unwilled proximity to others and to circumstances beyond one’s control. This “coming up against” is one modality that defines the body. And yet, this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself can be, and often is, what animates responsiveness to that world. (Butler 2009: 34)

The chapter’s final scene illustrates this form of responsiveness as Hammar, in bed at home, contentedly listens to the chorus of chiming clockworks (cf. the chapter title) emanating from his workshop below, the soundscape constituting a symbolic town symphony – “De slogo för stan” (243) – with the imagery also feeding into Hammar’s declaration of friendship with Andersson: “Mina klockor slå för dig” (244). The notion of a collective whose members are in tune with each other (indicative, again, of the importance of sound, musicality and rhythm in the novel and in Johnson’s writing more broadly) is likewise found in a concluding declaration of belief contained in Johnson’s autobiographical sketch, “Personligt dokument”, published five years after Stad i mörker in the seminal collection of self-portrayals by Swedish autodidactic authors, Ansikten: “Jag tror på samklangen”
Both the contemporary reviewer Artur Lundkvist and Johnson’s biographer Örjan Lindberger use related metaphors of a confluence of voices or human conditions in characterising the novel, with Lundkvist envisioning it as a town tapestry showing “trådarna i den underliga väv som är människoöden” (quoted in Lindberger 1986: 161), and Lindberger describing it as a “väv av stämmor, som avlöser varandra och flätas i varandra” (1986: 161).

In an article entitled “Affekt og rum”, Frederik Tygstrup discusses the recent “affective turn” that has taken place in the direction of the humanities and social sciences, following and building on the “spatial turn” of the preceding period. While acknowledging that it is not (as yet) possible to draw a conclusive conceptual borderline between the notions of “feeling” and “affect”, Tygstrup suggests that, whereas the former is individual and subjective, the latter is relational, situational and contextual: “emotionelle tilstande [er] ikke længere noget, vi har i os, men snarere noget vi finder os selv i, som vi paserer igennem eller dvæler i. Denne omvægning synes i nogen grad at være virksom i den seneste tids stigende interesse for affektivitet og affektstudier” (2013: 19). Referencing Raymond Williams’ seminal essay “Structures of Feeling” as one of his theoretical sources,9 Tygstrup goes on to argue that the affective turn shifts the focus from interior psychological states to a shared exterior reality, atmosphere or ambiance: “lokaliseringen af en bestemt følelse skifter fra et individs indre tilstand til et mindre klart afgrænset felt, hvor der hersker en fælles atmosfære” (2013: 20). Affectivity, including receptivity towards others, is produced by contingency and proximity in a specific environment, suggesting that affects are spatial phenomena in need of analytical tools and methods to explore them as such, argues Tygstrup: “Her bliver det interessant at undersøge affektens miljø, det felt af relationer som kendetegner specifikke situationer, såvel som de potentieler og muligheder, det understøtter. Eller med andre ord: affektens rumlige eksistens” (2013: 24).

Following Tygstrup, and closing our discussion, it would seem justified to argue that Stad i mörker, its concluding parts in particular, can meaningfully and rewardingly be considered in the light of this new interest in affectivity as a shared and spatial phenomenon. A contributing factor to the novel’s geomodernism is, as we have attempted to document in this article, its sustained ambition of capturing townscape atmospheres, ambiances and situational moods that impact in a variety of ways, both unwanted and in terms of fostering new forms of attachment and solidarity, on the characters who, by choice or by chance, find themselves in the northern urban environment. This perspective is broadly supported by the Johnson scholarship of both Lindberger and Carl Axel Westholm, who in his informative study of the novel, “Skollärar Andersson, parliamentarismen och ‘det ovanliga’”, highlights Stad i mörker as standing out in Johnson’s early output, not by way of its northern setting as such which it shares with other early texts as mentioned above, but by way of the density and inseparability of the web of threads it weaves between environment, humans, and their development: “I Stad i mörker, däremot, utgör småstaden – och denna småstads fixering till en nordlig breddgrad – en bakgrund, som på viktiga punkter är oskiljaktigt sammanvävd med romanens händelseförlopp och människoskildring” (Westholm 1957: 335). Andersson is the novel’s prime example of a gradual human turn towards the town, ambiguous as the place may be, a movement that is accelerated in the novel’s final chapter XI, its title, “Denna stad i mörker”, foregrounding the town as combining motif. Here, the teacher, resisting the subjective temptation of escape to the apparent freedom of the sea, commits himself to work for the future generation of the town, his pupils,10
and, it is suggested, to a cross-class love relationship in the local environment (itself symbolic of a conflation of centre and periphery in a social sense), while also declaring his friendship with Hammar: "Jag är er vän, ni är min första vän" (284). The teacher's development can be understood in ideological terms, as suggested by Westholm. It can be read, furthermore, as emblematic of and embodying a turn away from a notion of emotions as purely subjective, as "feeling", towards a new idea of shared affectivity. Overall, the protagonist commits himself to the same "marginal" sphere whose possibilities as a site for modernist literary expression Johnson's novel so convincingly demonstrates.

Notes
1 The fact that Johnson's travelogue in terms of direct depiction of place is fully focused on the domain of Norrbotten and contains within this region what Paul Fussell in his essay "Travel books as literary phenomena" calls "the completion of the circuit" (2001: 109) and identifies as an important compositional device in travel writing seems to indicate a locational intention of privileging the northern "periphery". This is similar to spatial "rules" operative in Stad i mörker, as I document in this article.
3 In the following, page references only are provided (in parentheses) after citations from Stad i mörker.
4 At the same time, the risks in terms of loss of engagement with the practicalities of politics and with political intervention that Anderson's "deep" perspective may imply are not necessarily exempt from Johnson's critique. In his preceding novel, Timans och rättfärdigheten, Johnson includes a scene, part of a section of the text that is set in post-war Berlin and infused with ideological debate (see further discussion later in this article), in which one of the protagonists, a visitor from a northern Swedish town, distances himself from a local ideologue's "millenarian" tunnel vision that shares some features with Anderson's views in Stad i mörker, on the grounds of its idealistic dissociation from a mundane reality in need of more immediate change: "Här låg en människa, som sig för långt framåt. Hans hopp skynde hans blick, och den grä verkligheten omkring honom försvann. [...] Om tusen år! Varför bekymra sig om den tiden, om den ens kommer att finnas?" (Johnson 1925: 62–63).
5 See, for example, Folke baksson in his informative essay "Den norrbottnska Odysseus. Eyvind Johnson, Norrbotten och Europa": "Det är en förtätd och dov skildring av livet på en liten, nordlig ort, påminnande om Boden, och av en tillvaro som är präglad av kyla, avstånd och inskränkhet. I denna lilla stad, som tycks sakna förbindelser med vitalare regioner, tycks livet fyllas med avstånd ochHonda" (1998: 103).
6 Similar nomenclature – in addition to locational hybridity – is operative when Andersson wonders about the terminology used in other galaxies: "Om de har vackra namn, som vi, vackra namn på fira ting? Om de har ordet stadsfullmäktige, ordet val, proklamation, framselig, representant?" (26).
7 It is noteworthy in the context of the critique of centrist thinking – and in the context of textual mapping and "celebration" of a northern town – that Johnson in his contribution to an official anthology published in 1943 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of municipal status being granted to his home town of Boden clearly, almost programmatically, identifies himself as an inhabitant of the margins. After a discourse on the difficulty, in his childhood, of drawing an exact boundary between the outlying area of Björkelund where he grew up and Boden itself, Johnson goes on to assert the indeterminacy, the liminal, and the "new settlement" dimensions of his childhood environment: "Någon större klarhet om var gränsen verkligen gick kom jag emellertid aldrig till i min barndom; och jag minns att vi björkelundslundar under alla förhållanden betraktade oss som gränsbor, ofta som något vildavästernbetonade trappers och nybyggare" (1943: 312).
8 Lundkvist's review was originally published in the newspaper Arbetsalen on 28 May 1927.
9 The essay is published in Danish translation in the same journal volume that contains Tystrup's article.
10 Johnson memory piece "Då: 1913–1914", published in the collection Stunder, vågor. Berättelser frånarer (1965), includes a section that describes how a teacher abandoned Johnson's school class immediately before the final exams and the confusion and disappointment this caused (1965: 331).
Westholm reads the harmonisation of the positions occupied by Andersson and Hammar as reflecting Johnson’s commitment – away from his previous syndicalist scepticism – to the system of parliamentarianism and its shared political practice (as represented by Hammar) in the wake of changes in the political system in Sweden after the First World War (1957: 543).

Works cited


