

Through the Heart of Africa: Identity in Transition as Shown in Per Wästberg's Novels

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Abstract. "Afrika förändrar människor" – Africa changes people – claims Per Wästberg on the pages of one of his books (1960b). His life and literary work seem to confirm the idea. In this article it is argued that the continent plays an important part in the process of identity transition. It is also an attempt at proving that the main character of Per Wästberg's sequence of four novels from between 1986 and 1993 – *Eldens skugga* (*The Shadow of the Fire*), *Bergets källa* (*The Source of the Mountain*), *Ljusets hjärta* (*Heart of the Light*) and *Vindens låga* (*The Flame of the Wind*) – follows a pattern similar to that of rites of passage. A brief analysis of the works is preceded by a summary of Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's anthropological theories on the three stages of rites of passage. Since the middle stage has Africa as its setting in the novels, it is given most attention. A description of Wästberg's and the main character's relationship with the continent will hopefully contribute to understanding why a stay in Africa becomes a crucial element of a change of identity.

Keywords: identity; rites of passage; liminality; the four elements; Cameroon

The whirling towards extinction resembles the
movement towards a birth. I give up hope, hunger
remains. To see is to live in others.

(Per Wästberg)

1. Introduction – Africa is the world

"Afrika är världen" – writes Per Wästberg, one of Sweden's major literary figures, in his reportage (1960a: 246). This could easily be *the* sentence to summarize his long-lasting, intimate relationship with the continent. Born in 1933, Wästberg made his literary debut at the age of fifteen with a collection of short stories *Pojke med*

såpbubblor [Boy with Soap Bubbles]. When he was in his twenties, he was granted a Rotary scholarship and went on a study-trip to Central Africa and South Africa, where he was deeply moved by the hardships the people there underwent as a result of white colonial rule and apartheid.¹ Not only did this experience prove to be a turning point in his literary-political career, but it also imprinted itself so heavily upon his mind and heart that the theme 'Africa' has never since disappeared from his works for good. In 1960 he published two influential reportages on race discrimination – *Förbjudet område* [Forbidden Area] and *På svarta listan* [On the Black List]; books that inspired a number of Swedish writers to follow in his footsteps into what was coming to be called the Third World.

Per Wästberg founded the first Anti-Apartheid movement in Scandinavia (1959), set up Swedish Amnesty (1964) and was also a contact man for some of the South African freedom movements. Wästberg's true devotion to the cause of social justice in the continent led to his being called the ambassador of Africa. In addition, he studied and promoted African literature. His major works in the field include *Afrika berättar, en antologi* (1961), *The Writer in Modern Africa* (1968), *Afrikas moderna litteratur* (1969) and *Afrikansk lyrik* (1970). However, Wästberg is not merely a politically involved academic with a soft spot for Africa. He is also acknowledged as a fiction writer. The author has tried his hand at close to everything – from poetry, through short stories, to novels or even whole cycles of novels – yet despite his having been quite productive and receiving good reviews, Wästberg's fiction is still overshadowed by his international literary feat from the 1960s.

Nevertheless, it is his novel sequence from between 1986 and 1993 – *Eldens skugga*, *Bergets källa*, *Ljusets hjärta* and *Vindens låga* – that is the major focus of this article. The titles have been translated into English as *The Shadow of the Fire*, *The Source of the Mountain*, *Heart of the Light* and *The Flame of the Wind* respectively (Watson 1993), and already at first glance it seems obvious that the author attempted to contain the life cycle, determined by the flow of the four elements, within his tetralogy. Purifying fire symbolizes both the end and the beginning of a new life. Similarly, going deep into the source of the mountain could mean *descensus ad infernos* as well as *regressus ad uterum* (Holmberg 1999), while crossing the source (water) signifies a border of some sort – perhaps a dividing line between different lives. Wästberg next presents warmth and the enlightening powers of light (or fire) again, and finally air/wind, which brings the spirit of vitality and embraces new beginnings.

Whether the life cycle starts at birth and ends in death or the other way round, does not seem to matter. In fact, it does not even have to be a physiological process.

¹ Wästberg's memoirs have been published recently, the second volume of which – *Vägarna till Afrika* [Roads To Africa] deals with his experience from the years he spent in Africa.

Human lives are governed by changes of all sorts – coming of age, moving between different ethnic identities or religions, being promoted at work, entering a secret society or even transitioning between sexes. Regardless of the nature of the change, it is quite safe to assume that it is often introduced by crisis, abandonment and an end of something old, and reaches closure when a new state of affairs is accepted. On a symbolic level, the process can be expressed as the interplay between the four elements, which is exactly what I believe Per Wästberg tried to convey through the titles of the four novels in question. The books are joined by the main character, Johan Fredrik Victorin, whose complete transition between identities takes place throughout the sequence. Interestingly enough, though not unexpectedly, the writer made Africa, in many different ways, the core of that process.

Already on the first pages of the first book, the reader finds out that Johan Fredrik Viktorin has a famous namesake – a talented adventurer and a natural scientist who traveled South Africa.² What is more, the very first sentence reads: “Han heter Johan Fredrik Victorin” [His name is Johan Fredrik Victorin] (1995b: 11), which means that the character's identity is mainly determined by his name. This fact, together with his having been named after two Swedish kings, was an inexhaustible source of frustration for the main character. His family thought he was endowed with extraordinary potential and expected him to become a great man one day, which he felt incapable of living up to. However, his name is not the only thing that links him to Africa. His grandfather's brother Wilhelm Knutson, also known as Afrika-Knutson, was the driving force behind Johan Fredrik's search for identity and an inspiration to look for it in Cameroon.³

Not only does Johan Fredrik Victorin have a manifold relationship with Africa, but his journey to the continent is also compared to his going down into the depths of his existence. It is the only place – and a sacred place at that – where he can search for meaning. Cameroon itself being a land in transition, somewhere on the way between the status of a colony and a fully integrated independence, is an interesting choice. It is a country passing through liminality and it becomes a perfect embodiment of what a liminal space could be for the main character of Wästberg's novels.

² A real life figure whose journals and letters, edited by J.W. Grill, were published in 1863 as *Johan Fredrik Victorins resa i Kaplandet, åren 1853-1855. Jagt- och naturbilder ur den aflidne unge naturforskarens bref och dagböcker*.

³ Also based on a real person. Knut Wilhelm Knutson was one of the people who worked in Cameroon towards the end of the 19th century. Their station was called *Sveaborg*. Knutson made appeals to the Department of Foreign Affairs to persuade them officially to give that piece of land the status of a Swedish colony.

2. Rites of passage – nature and characteristics

The concept of liminality was introduced to anthropology in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep in his groundbreaking work *Les rites de passage*, where he observes that every change in social structure invariably becomes an encounter between a given society's *sacrum* and *profanum* (2006). Since the two are in clear juxtaposition, such interaction has to be controlled and preferably take place within a neutral context. That neutral space in between the sacred and the profane is what is called liminality, or liminal space. The process of entering and leaving liminality is facilitated by rituals, whose function is also to 'tame' the transformation so that it neither throws the community off balance nor destroys it. Rituals of this kind are called rites of passage as they effectively comprise a transition between different states, statuses or structures.

According to van Gennep (2006), three phases can be distinguished in such a passage; each marked by a different set of rites: a) preliminal phase – *rites de séparation*, b) liminal phase – *rites de marge*, c) postliminal phase – *rites d'agrégation*. The keyword to understanding the essence of rites of passage is obviously the Latin *limen* which means threshold. Literally, it is "the bottom part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a building."⁴ Symbolically, it can denote a turning point in one's life – which may take the shape of a breakdown or a breakthrough, but in either case boils down to a moment of change when one disengages from one's role in the community and (possibly) prepares for reentering the community with a new role.

The *limen* is placed on the outskirts of the preliminal phase and, for an individual or a whole group, signifies detachment from previously fixed positions in social structures. At the same time, it ushers in the liminal, transitional phase during which the ritual subjects have "few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 1977: 94). Being devoid of full membership, liminal *personae* find themselves in a period of ambiguity where usual rules of behavior do not apply. As Turner puts it, they can be treated as "structurally invisible" (2006: 114). After the third stage, when the transition is complete and the entities in question reincorporated into the society, they are, once again, obliged to conform to the customs, cultural standards and ethical norms dictated by that society.

Originally, rites of passage were perceived as pertaining solely to traditional tribal communities with clear-cut boundaries between age groups and members' social positions. Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Van Gennep claimed that rites of passage were "rites which accompany *every* change of place, state, social position and age" [emphasis mine] (2006: 30). It was a statement that

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*

was particularly loudly echoed by the academics that succeeded him. In 1967 Victor Turner published his work *The Forest of Symbols*, in which he drew on and further developed van Gennep's theories. That year, the concept of liminality started receiving more attention from scholars all over the world. Turner's work is interesting mostly because he focuses on liminality and discusses how it is represented on a symbolic level. Thanks to a detailed analysis of the symbols characteristic of the rites of passage, he ensured widespread usage of these theories also in fields other than anthropology.⁵

2.1. Attributes of 'threshold people'

While stepping over a threshold into a building or a room we are for a short while neither outside nor inside. We are passing through a non-defined, ambiguous space and by doing so we acquire some of its attributes.⁶ It is especially visible when the threshold one is stepping over is symbolic. Turner notices that liminal entities are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (1977: 95). Their transition is aided by rituals during which they are represented by symbols revolving around darkness, invisibility and wilderness, but also around being in a grave or in the womb. The latter types of symbols are undoubtedly connected to the idea of losing or leaving a state (as if dying) and entering or creating a new one (as if being (re)born). Therefore, liminal *personae* are often identified with earth, compared to small children or infants (sometimes even encouraged to act like ones) and have little or no clothing.

A loss, or simply lack, of everything that usually locates positions in cultural contexts is typical of 'threshold people.' More often than not they are devoid of all possessions and represented as having nothing. Without property, characteristic insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or position in a kinship system, they cannot be distinguished from other initiates. They are anonymous, sexless and submissive. Consequently, the initiates cannot exercise any power or influence that earlier were part of their social lives. They are truly powerless, passive and humbled. And since, as Turner notes, speech in tribal societies does not only serve a communicative purpose, but is also a sign of power and wisdom, threshold people are usually silent (1977). Obediently, initiates follow the instructions of the elders who inscribe new social knowledge upon them as if they were a *tabula rasa*.

⁵ Psychology, sociology and literature (that is, domains operating with symbolism on regular basis) proved to be most fertile grounds when it came to adapting and reworking the notion of liminality, or even rites of passage as such (e.g. Hollis, Huuskonen, Törrönen & Maunu, Schjødt)

⁶ It is important to notice that temporariness and mobility are crucial to the notion of liminality. It is always just a phase, a limbo of statuslessness in between two relatively stable states.

Being neither here nor there, characterized by the absence of self-defining social connections and having an indeterminate status, liminal entities are usually perceived by the rest of the community as impure, and therefore threatening. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas argues that all which eludes clear classification in accordance with conventional criteria and social norms, or falls between, but outside, the accepted boundaries, is regarded as “polluting” and “dangerous” – hence the element of (also physical) isolation of initiates that is almost always present in the course of rites of passage. The isolation not only symbolizes detachment from previous status, but also protects the society from being polluted by the unrefined.

When outside their usual surroundings, liminal *personae* are submitted to a range of ordeals and humiliations. There, they are given the opportunity to get stronger and wiser, and the time they spend in isolation is for them to reflect upon their existence. With the help of holy objects and ritual performances the initiates communicate with the *sacrum*, which, together with reflection, forms the essence of liminality. Three different processes are involved in this kind of communication, namely the deconstruction of culture into singular units, assembling these units according to unreal and monstrous patterns, and finally reassembling them again in a way that corresponds to the new status the initiates is about to assume. Having reached a deeper understanding of their identity, the initiates are then reincorporated into the society – an event usually ceremonially marked by the resumption of sexual relations (van Gennep 2006; Turner 1977).

Generally, as Turner argues, the differences between liminality and status systems can be summarized with the help of binary oppositions (1977). Even though this list includes only the most common attributes of threshold people and situations, it might still be useful when determining whether a particular situation (be it within an anthropological, sociological or literary context) comprises a rite of passage.

STATUS SYSTEM	LIMINALITY
STATE	TRANSITION
STATUS	ABSENCE OF STATUS
DISTINCTIONS OF RANK	ABSENCE OF RANK
SYSTEMS OF NOMENCLATURE	ANONYMITY
INEQUALITY	EQUALITY
PROPERTY	ABSENCE OF PROPERTY
DISTINCTIONS OF CLOTHING	NAKEDNESS OR UNIFORM CLOTHING
JUST PRIDE OF POSITION	HUMILITY

OBEDIENCE ONLY TO SUPERIOR RANK	TOTAL OBEDIENCE
SEXUALITY	SEXUAL CONTINENCE
SPEECH	SILENCE
AVOIDANCE OF PAIN AND SUFFERING	ACCEPTANCE OF PAIN AND SUFFERING
SECULARITY	SACREDNESS

3. Johan Fredrik Victorin's journey to the continent of changes

A number of factors suggest that the course of Per Wästberg's four novels correlates with the threefold structure of rites of passage, despite the fact that there is apparently one book too many. One has to remember, though, that the original intention of the author was to write a trilogy, but having completed *Ljusets hjärta* he knew that the last words had not yet been said. It is almost impossible not to think that the writer was somewhat sidetracked when he wrote it. He drastically shifted focus from Johan Fredrik to his lover Ellen Mörk, who also became the main narrator. A close reading of this text proves that it is rather a description of Ellen's own rite of passage, and not much more than a prolongation of Johan Fredrik's liminal phase. *Eldens skugga*, then, corresponds to the preliminal phase of the rites of passage, *Bergets källa* to the liminal phase and *Vindens låga* to the final, postliminal stage. Naturally, *Ljusets hjärta* cannot be ignored, but it might be that this part of the sequence signifies the author's own liminality, where he found himself in limbo somewhere between the beginning and end of the main story.⁷

3.1. Separation

As previously discussed, separation is the first stage in rites of passage, but separation on its own does not have to mean that such a rite is being introduced. In order to prove that *Eldens skugga* corresponds to the preliminal phase, it is necessary to pinpoint the plot details typical of that phase *and* to show that those details forward Johan Fredrik's three-step transition. Two events – two different crises – in the main character's life determine the flow of *Eldens skugga*. First, Johan Fredrik's wife abandons him and seeks divorce and secondly, one of his relatives dies. Both take place within the preliminal phase and both by definition include separation – parting with a loved one or with life. But they also mark the beginnings of liminality; they are the thresholds van Genneep wrote about (2006).

⁷ This, obviously, does not mean that *every* digression denotes limbo or carries traces of liminality.

Johan Fredrik even says that “en skilsmässa är en amputation” [a divorce is an amputation] and compares his feelings to those experienced after the death of a loved one (Wästberg 1995b: 193). However, it is the actual death – Afrika-Knutson’s death – that wreaks more havoc upon the main character’s existence. It turns out to be the prerequisite for Johan Fredrik’s communication with the *sacrum*, which constitutes the heart of liminality.

A number of events that follow Johan Fredrik’s divorce suggest that he has already entered the middle stage of his identity transition. He moves out of the house he shared with Gudrun, thus leaving his usual surroundings. Then, he rents an apartment, instead of buying one, which means he realizes his situation is of a transitional rather than constant nature. Through a series of spontaneous decisions, he also finds himself naked on a masseuse’s couch, and that, on a different level, also points to a symbolic detachment from everything he used to be. Turner wrote that initiates’ lack of clothing can symbolize either death (separation) or birth (reincorporation) (1977). There is no doubt that Johan Fredrik’s nakedness is that of a dead person rather than a newborn: he feels “som på en balsamerares bord” [as if on an embalmer’s table] (Wästberg 1995b: 246). Even though he visits Kerstin, the masseuse, regularly, he remains anonymous – she does not know his name or occupation. In this way, he is absolutely devoid of everything that determined his status before – with Kerstin he is neither a diplomat nor a husband. Moreover, during their first meeting Johan Fredrik is informed that the woman dictates the rules and he has to obey or leave. Therefore, they never enter into a sexual relationship, despite his feeling attracted to her.

Towards the end of the first book, it seems as if there were already adequate evidence to say that the main character’s transformation had gone through the first two phases. There was the feeling of inadequateness and frustration spurred by the thought of the talented namesake; we know that Johan Fredrik became a diplomat because he never excelled in anything particular, and now feels like he assumed someone else’s identity. Having lived with such a burden for over forty years, he decides it is time for change only after he is affected by two personal tragedies. He is forced to step over the threshold of his broken marriage and the exhausted life of a relative. After that, one can observe most of the attributes of a liminal *persona* in Johan Fredrik – absence of status, property and clothing, anonymity, submissiveness and sexual continence. However, his transition cannot yet be complete. In fact, it has merely begun. It is as if his liminality were gradable, and he only experienced the lower intensity levels. The missing part is his communication with the *sacrum*, and only with that can he, so to speak, reach the peak of liminality, and move on to the next stage.

3.2. Transition

It is in the second novel, *Bergets källa*, that the plot and Wästberg's writing reach maximum intensity. The whole book is about Johan Fredrik's transition state and his journey to Africa, but at the same time it touches upon the issues of (post)colonialism and Cameroon's passage towards a new identity as an independent country. The reason why Johan Fredrik chose Cameroon, and not any other African state, as his destination is because Wilhelm Knutson left him all his documents and encouraged him to try and do what he could not accomplish himself. Namely to persuade the interested parties to acknowledge Sweden's rights to the piece of Cameroonian land he cultivated at the end of 19th century. Even though the diplomat does go to Cameroon, his intention is not so much to pursue his relative's legal goals as to find himself through Knutson. He plans on following in his footsteps and he hopes to recover his own *raison d'être* on the way.

Bergets källa opens with the main character on board a plane to Douala. Once again, it is possible to observe many of the characteristic traits of liminality, to the extent that they cannot be ignored. First and foremost, Johan Fredrik left his constant milieu – his *profanum* – and is isolated from everyone and everything that helped him build his previous status. He travels alone and as a private person, no longer protected by Sweden's three crowns. On sabbatical and bereft of diplomatic status, he is to the Cameroonians no more than a tourist among other tourists. He is virtually invisible. Therefore, Johan Fredrik has no official power and, being a stranger, has to conform to the rules set by the natives. Interestingly enough, he compares his invisibility to that of a child disregarded by its parents. As a child he is unaware of how the world he finds himself in is constructed, and he needs instructions.

Already at the start, he lacks suitable knowledge, status and power. Following Turner's guidelines, the next question to ask would be: And what about property? Johan Fredrik arrives in Douala with some personal baggage (including Knutson's memoirs) and a few items he wishes to give to a local museum. On the first day, he is robbed of the latter and on what he believes to be his last day in Africa of the former. Between the two episodes he looks for and finds Knutson's granddaughter, Francine. Once more, Johan Fredrik is in a subordinate position. Francine, as insider, is his instructor. Since he is well aware of the fact that without her he would be helpless, he accepts his position. He also tries to keep his desires at bay, despite the sexual tension between them. Johan Fredrik fears that if he did have sex with Francine, he would embrace Africa in the same way as Wilhelm Knutson did when he slept with Malinda. As a result, Africa was the only place where Knutson felt at home. Johan Fredrik does not

want that, because he knows that he did not go there to stay. For him, the continent is his liminal space. He is, therefore, merely passing through.

The plot reaches its climax when Johan Fredrik is kidnapped and taken to a cave in the Cameroon Mountains – that is, to “Afrikas oberäkneliga hjärta” [Africa’s unpredictable heart] (Wästberg 1992: 336). The mountain itself is throughout the novel depicted as a very special, sacred place, where life and death follow each other in an interminable cycle of existence. It is then no wonder that it also becomes the setting for the main character’s communication with the *sacrum*. Johan Fredrik’s old self symbolically decomposes inside the cave – he is now a truly neutral creature struggling to see new direction. He is a liminal entity, so he is also silent – which should, however, not be confused with soundlessness. He screams that he hates Africa, but he does so in Swedish, and the two guards keeping watch on him do not know the language. His screams remain as good as unheard. As a diplomat, he talked to achieve certain goals and now, for the first time, he is unable to exercise power through words.

Against his will, Johan Fredrik is kept in perfect isolation, yet he never tries to escape. On the contrary, he accepts the suffering and, since it exposes his soul, he manages to use it as a means to forward his transition. On the final pages of *Bergets källa* Johan Fredrik is nearly dead, and his mind confused. It is as if he were in a trans, or had performed a ritual dance – he howls, creeps like an animal and licks the walls of the cave. Most likely, this was the way he communicated with his *sacrum*. In this moment of apparent insanity he has a revelation and discovers his true identity. Obviously, it is an identity that he does not at first recognize: “En främling har väntat på honom i grottan, det anar han nu” [A stranger awaited him in the cave, he now believes] (Wästberg 1998: 520). He confronts himself, but what comes out of this confrontation is not clear from the second part of the tetralogy.

3.3. Reincorporation

The last two books, *Ljusets hjärta* and *Vindens låga*, lead us through a series of events that conclude Johan Fredrik’s identity transition. Upon his release, he commits to a romantic (and sexual) relationship with Ellen Mörk and they move into the apartment Wilhelm Knutson left him. In this way, he goes back to the point where his journey started. Earlier, he described that apartment as “ett nyckelhål mot ett Afrika som inte längre finns” [a keyhole to the Africa that no longer exists], but which he had to rediscover (Wästberg 1995b: 275). His trip to Cameroon made it possible and through the new Africa, he also found himself. Towards the end of the last novel, Johan Fredrik resigns from his work in the Department of Foreign Affairs, thus officially ridding himself of the diplomatic status that did not suit him. Later on, he accepts a position in the newly-founded

(and very symbolic) Institute of Futurology. As if that were not enough, the Cameroonian government decides to give him the rights to the land his relative had fought for, as compensation for his own suffering in the cave and as an expression of gratitude for Wilhelm Knutson's contributions. Johan Fredrik's transition is complete. He has left behind everything he used to be and embraced his new status in a new environment.

4. Conclusion

In his writing, Per Wästberg refers to Africa as the whole world, a continent of changes, his home and even as "en plats inom [honom] själv som [han] hade varit avskuren ifrån men alltid längtat till" [a place inside himself from which he had been cut off, but always longed for] (Wästberg 1995a: 14). This statement also seems to be true for his characters from the analyzed tetralogy – Wilhelm Knutson virtually fed on his memories from Cameroon and Johan Fredrik finds himself only once he goes down into "Africa's unpredictable heart." It has been shown that the structure of the novel sequence corresponds to the anthropological model of rites of passage, and special attention was paid to the liminal phase as set in Africa. There is no doubt that the continent is charged with an unusual amount of emotional value for the author, to the extent that it becomes much more than just a geographical place. My impression is that, for Wästberg, Africa is a philosophical notion; a force that governs life and death, creation and destruction. It is a term denoting the depths of one's soul where the whirling towards extinction truly resembles the movement towards birth.

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