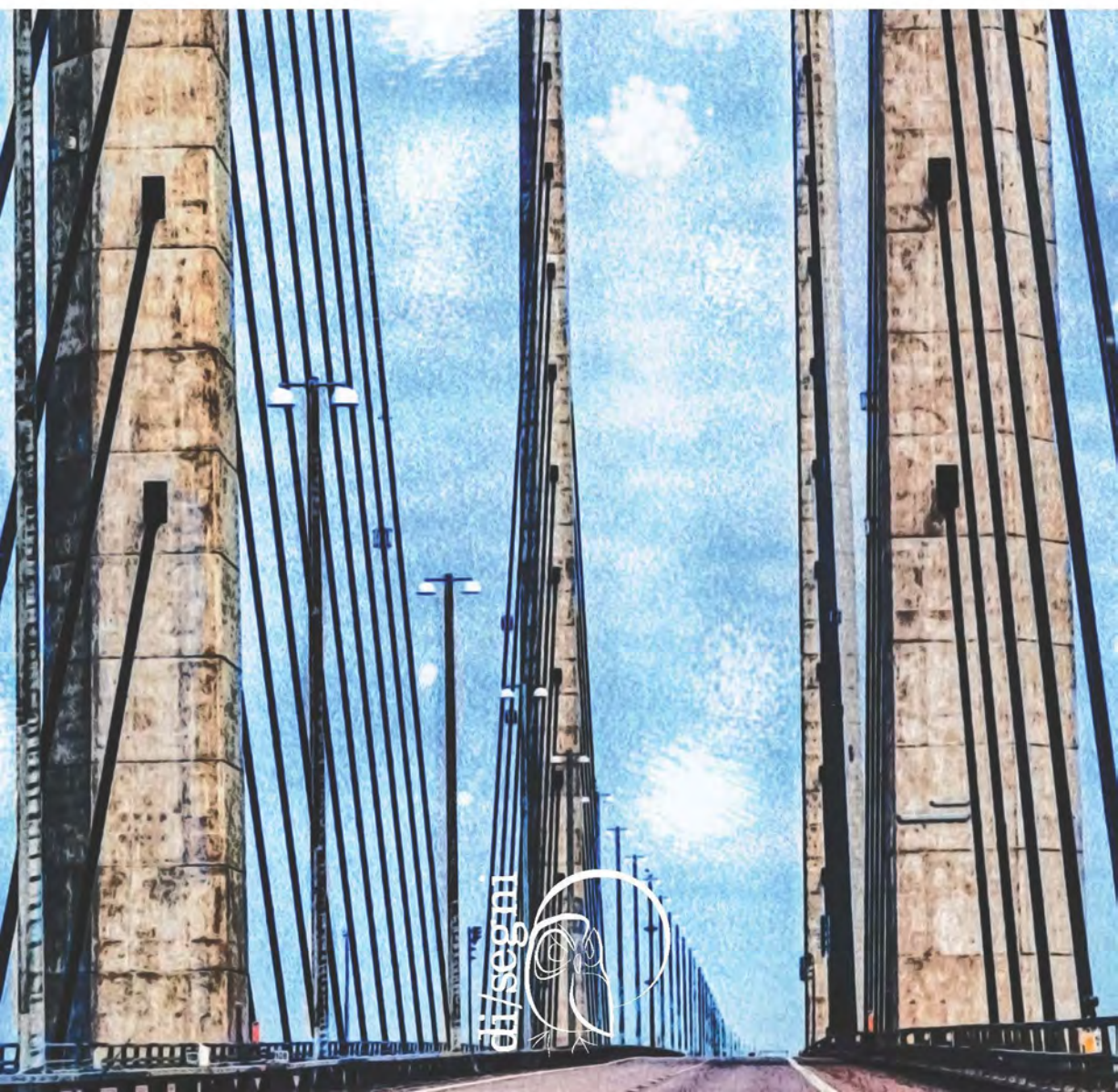


BRIDGES TO SCANDINAVIA

Edited by Andrea Meregalli and Camilla Storskog





BRIDGES TO SCANDINAVIA

Edited by *Andrea Meregalli and Camilla Storskog*

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BRIDGES BETWEEN THE MARGINS OF EUROPE: PORTUGAL IN TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER'S OEUVRE

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The theme of travel plays a major role in Tomas Tranströmer's oeuvre both as a metaphoric element and as a real experience that gives the reader the chance to meet other places and cultures, filtered through the poet's eyes. Tranströmer's own description of his poems as meeting places ("mötesplatser"), in which "skilda kulturer och människor strömmar samman i ett konstverk" (Tranströmer 1993, 299-300),¹ points to the role of poetry as a driving force behind the creation of cultural bridges.

Among the poems written by the 2011 winner of the Nobel Prize in literature that originated from encounters with other worlds, two are dedicated to Portugal, a country that Tranströmer visited on more than one occasion. The first of these poems, entitled *Lissabon (Lisbon)*, was published in the collection *Klanger och spår (Sounds and tracks)*, 1966.² The second, *Funchal*, is the poem closing *Sanningsbarriären (The Truth Barrier)*, published in 1978.

In this article I will offer some observations on both poems as relevant examples of the broad range of themes in Tranströmer's poetic universe.

Tomas Tranströmer is unanimously acknowledged as one of the most influential Swedish poets of the second half of the twentieth century. His body of work has attracted enormous attention, both in Sweden and abroad, and the number of translations into over sixty languages no doubt testifies to the international renown he has achieved throughout the years. His concise

¹ "Separate cultures and people converge in a work of art." Translations are mine when no other source is named.

² The title *Klanger och spår* has been translated in fairly different ways in English. In addition to the title given above, one finds also *Resonance and Foot-tracks* (the title given by Robert Bly) and *Bells and Tracks* (the title given by Robin Fulton).

and essential style gives shape to a kind of poetry that has been praised for granting access to reality in its multilayered and multiform nature, combining images which pertain to widely separate domains of human experience.³

In his life, Tranströmer travelled the world far and wide, and his journeys certainly contributed to the inspiration for his poetry. From Kjell Espmark's seminal study, published in 1983, we learn that Tranströmer visited Portugal at least twice: the first time in 1956, during a trip that took him through Spain and Portugal and as far as North Africa; the second time in 1974, when he visited Madeira and its main city, Funchal (Espmark 1983, 11).

Although the titles of both poems on Portugal may at first seem to suggest that they share an interest in the urban landscape (i.e., Lisbon and Funchal), the two texts are quite different in terms of how they transform the travel experience into poetic images, as will be shown below.

Klanger och spår, Tranströmer's fourth collection of poems, elicited a heated debate in Sweden on the role of poetry in an age marked by a growing ideologisation of literature, which was understood by a number of younger left-wing intellectuals as a tool to take social action. For this reason, socially committed artists considered Tranströmer's rather contemplative and allusive attitude to the object of poetic observation in many respects too bourgeois and detached from the dramatic events that were taking centre stage throughout the 1960s, especially in Vietnam (cf. Espmark 1983, 7-8).⁴ Three years after the publication of *Klanger och spår*, Tranströmer defined his poems as "aktiva meditationer som inte vill söva utan väcka",⁵ thus implicitly countering the criticism levelled against his poetry as a contemplative act, while stressing the ethical and the cognitive value of the poetic word.

The collection includes poems whose titles point to travels to various places, including Africa, Berlin, Oklahoma, and of course Lisbon.

One of the major themes in *Klanger och spår* is the poet's relationship with time (past, present, and future), and the poem entitled *Om historien* (*About History*) is all about such relationship.

[...]

Alltihop liknar Historien: vårt NU. Vi är nedsänkta, vi lyssnar.

[...]

³ For a short description in English of Tranströmer's poetry see Orton 1999. In addition to Espmark 1983, major studies devoted to Tranströmer include Bergsten 1989 and 2011; Schiöler 1999.

⁴ On the same topic, Rochelle Wright (1996, 396) writes: "The fact that he pursued his own interests regardless of the prevailing political climate drew fire from more doctrinaire poets, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, when he was accused of being elitist and escapist. His work is not ideological, but in a broader sense it is often concerned with human history, with the world surrounding the contemporary individual, from which there is no escape."

⁵ "Active meditations whose aim is to wake us up, not to put us to sleep." Quoted from Schiöler 1999, 201.

III

Goethe reste i Afrika 1926 förklädd till Gide och såg allt.
Några ansikten blir tydligare av allt de får se efter döden.
När dagsnyheterna från Algeriet lästes upp
framträdde ett stort hus där alla fönster var mörkklagda,
alla utom ett. Och där såg man Dreyfus' ansikte.

IV

Radikal och reaktionär lever tillsammans som i ett olyckligt äktenskap,
formade av varann, beroende av varann,
Men vi som är deras barn måste bryta oss loss.
Varje problem ropar på sitt eget språk.
Gå som en spårhund där sanningen trampade!
(Tranströmer 2011, 149-50)⁶

This poem has been subject to diverging interpretations. Jan Stenkvist, for example, highlights the attitude of resignation to the course of history which, he claims, derives from Tranströmer's notion of history itself as repetition (on Stenkvist's view of Tranströmer's notion of history see Espmark 1983, 123-24). However, Kjell Espmark is able to demonstrate how such an interpretation does not do justice to the complexity of the poet's philosophical notion of time:

en rad dikter visar att historien i Tranströmers universum inte är cyklisk till sin natur utan är en gränslös process där skapelsen arbetar på att förverkliga sina dolda avsikter; den implicita framtiden och det längesedan realiserade skymtar här båda i det skapande nuet (Espmark 1983, 124).⁷

⁶ "[...] / It's all like History: our Now. We are submerged, we listen. // [...] / III / Goethe travelled in Africa in 1926 disguised as Gide and saw everything. / Some faces become clearer from everything they see after death. / When the daily news from Algeria was read out / a large house appeared with all the windows blackened, / all except one. And there we saw the face of Dreyfus. // IV / Radical and Reactionary live together as in an unhappy marriage, / molded by each other, dependent on each other. / But we who are their children must break loose. / Every problem cries in its own language. / Go like a bloodhound where the truth has trampled" (Tranströmer 2006, 80).

⁷ "A number of poems show that history in Tranströmer's universe is not cyclic by nature, but a boundless process in which the creation strives to realise its hidden aims; the implicit future and the distant achievement appear here both in the creating present." In *Elegi (Elegy)*, one of the poems in the collection *17 Dikter (17 Poems, 1954)*, Tranströmer writes: "Det finns en korsväg i ett ögonblick. / Distansernas musik har sammanströmmat. / Allt sammanvuxet till ett yvigt träd. / Försvunna städer glittrar i dess grenverk" (Tranströmer 2011, 44); "There's a crossroads in a moment. Music of the distances converges. All grown together in a leafy tree. Vanished cities glitter in its branches" (this translation is quoted from Orton 1999, 246).

The poet's call for action, which is evident in the previously cited section IV of the poem ("Men vi som är deras barn måste bryta oss loss"), testifies to the active role assigned to human beings as the medium through which the divine turns its hidden intentions into reality (Espmark 1983, 125). This demonstrates – quite conceivably – how reductive it is to see a passive resignation in Tranströmer's attitude towards history.

What has been observed so far about *Klanger och spår* provides the framework within which the poem about Lisbon will be analysed.

Lissabon

I stadsdelen Alfama sjöng de gula spårvagnarna i uppförsbranterna.
Där fanns två fångelser. Ett var för tjuvarna.
De vinkade genom gallerfönstren.
De skrek att de ville bli fotograferade!

"Men här", sa konduktören och fnittrade som en kluven människa
"här sitter politiker". Jag såg fasaden, fasaden, fasaden
och högt uppe i ett fönster en man
som stod med en kikare för ögonen och såg ut över havet.

Tvättkläderna hängde i det blå. Murarna var heta.
Flugorna läste mikroskopiska brev.
Sex år senare frågade jag en dam från Lissabon:
"Är det riktigt, eller har jag drömt det?"
(Tranströmer 2011, 137)⁸

The image of the yellow tramcar, i.e., one of the symbols of the city, introduces the reader to Tranströmer's Lisbon. The poet's attention is caught by two prisons located in the Alfama quarter, the oldest core of the city that managed to survive the terrible earthquake of 1755.

As Tranströmer visited the Portuguese capital when the country was still under the dictatorship of Salazar, the founder of the so-called *Estado Novo* ('New State'),⁹ the reference to imprisoned politicians is best understood as pointing to political dissidents who opposed Salazar's regime.¹⁰

⁸ "Lisbon // In the Alfama quarter the yellow tramcars sang on the steep slopes. / There were two prisons. One was for thieves. / They waved through the grilled windows. / They shouted to be photographed. // 'But here', said the conductor giggling like a split man, / 'here sit politicians.' I saw the façade the façade the façade / and high up in a window a man / who stood with a telescope to his eye and looked out over the sea. // Laundry hung in blue air. The walls were hot. / The flies read microscopic letters. / Six years later I asked a woman from Lisbon: / 'Is it true, or have I dreamt it?'" (Tranströmer 2006, 72).

⁹ As is widely known, Portugal was set free on 25 April 1974, during the so-called *Revolução dos Cravos* ('Carnation Revolution').

¹⁰ The prison for politicians named by Tranströmer could be the *Prisão do Aljube*, located

Unlike the thieves who show themselves through barred windows, politicians are kept hidden inside the prison, inaccessible to the observer's view. This distinction suggests that a 'crime of opinion' is punished more harshly than any other kind of offence in Salazar's Portugal. The invisibility of political dissidents as opposed to common robbers highlights the brutality of the regime in terms of repression of dissent. The difficulty to see behind the façade of the prison, marked by the threefold repetition of the word ("Jag såg fasaden, fasaden, fasaden"), gains indeed particular significance when referring to the political situation in Portugal at the time of Tranströmer's visit. As Espmark (1983, 146) points out: "detta är vad man tillåts se av oppositionen i fascismens Portugal, detta är dess möjligheter att nå ut till betraktaren på gatan".¹¹ The political dimension of the poem is further stressed by the closing lines of the second stanza, where Tranströmer refers to the conductor's *kluvenhet* ('duality') as he tells the observer about the prison for politicians. Espmark (1983, 146) interprets his giggling as expressing "kluvenheten mellan hemlig förbundenhet med motståndet och distans till 'desa politiker', som är det vanliga folket främmande".¹² In my opinion, though, the conductor's duality may point to another type of conflict, i.e., the one existing between what people were expected to say about the government and its opponents and what they really thought about it.

The details opening the third and final stanza signal typical summer weather and add to the description of the urban landscape: the laundry hanging in the air is a well-known scene to any visitor to the Alfama quarter. The image of flies reading microscopic letters is best interpreted against the background sketched in the first two stanzas. Here Tranströmer seems to suggest that, although the political prisoners are behind bars, subtle and almost invisible forms of communication are still possible in an effort to keep the resistance alive.¹³ At the same time, though, it is clear that the reference to the tiny dimension of the letters is meant to highlight the tight control under which any form of communication is held in Salazar's Portugal.

The final question ("Är det riktigt, eller har jag drömt det?"), though, casts some doubts on the reality of what has been described in the poem,

some metres away from Lisbon's cathedral, in the Alfama quarter. The prison was closed in 1965.

¹¹ "This is what is allowed to be seen of the opposition in fascist Portugal, this is its chance to reach out to the observer on the street."

¹² "The duality between a secret alliance with the opposition and the distance from 'these politicians', who are foreign to common people."

¹³ Talking about the poem *Hommages*, included in *Klanger och spår*, in an interview in 1982 Tranströmer says: "Life is occupied territory. Existence is locked into other people's decisions... all those people who put words in your mouth, who decide what you are supposed to see, what you are supposed to say. It's quite visible in a totalitarian state, but in a democracy... Yet there are tiny cracks of freedom, safety valves. The task of the poem is to tend to those cracks, to keep them open" (quoted from Bankier 1990, 592). Conceivably, these thoughts can be applied to *Lissabon*, too.

and leaves it up to the reader to decide whether it was a dream or not. This question appears to be a way to express the absurdity of the situation, something that the poet finds difficult to acknowledge as real, i.e., the lack of freedom and the criminalisation of political dissent.

In this connection, it is clear that *Lissabon* is not a poem detached from the poet's own time. On the contrary, it is a bitter commentary on the political circumstances in Portugal, a poem imbued with political commitment.¹⁴

A quite different atmosphere pervades the reader in the other poem dedicated to Portugal. As mentioned above, *Funchal* was published in 1978 as part of *Sanningsbarriären*, Tranströmer's eighth collection. The title of the collection refers to the notion of truth, one of the most important elements in Tranströmer's universe. In an interview given in New York on 13 October 1979, the poet explains what is meant by 'truth-barrier': "[...] I am always writing on the borderline – the borderline between the inner world and the outer world. I call this borderline the truth-barrier, the title of my latest book, because that is the point where you can see the truth". In the same interview, Tranströmer also says that his "poems come to life when a strong impulse from the outer world meets a strong impulse from the inner world" (quoted in Espmark 1983, 90).

The place where the inner and the outer worlds meet is thus where individuals have the chance to get to know themselves, as one learns in the second stanza of *Preludier (Preludes)*:

två sanningar närmar sig varann. En kommer innifrån,
en kommer utifrån
och där de möts har man en chans att få se sig själv.
(Tranströmer 2011, 185)¹⁵

Let us now consider the text of *Funchal*:

Fiskrestaurangen på stranden, enkel, ett skjul uppfört av skepps-
brutna. Många vänder i dörren men inte vindstötarna från havet.
En skugga står i sin rykande hytt och steker två fiskar enligt ett
gammalt recept från Atlantis, små explosioner av vitlök, olja som
rinner på tomatskivorna. Varje tugga säger att oceanen vill oss
väl, ett nynnande från djupen.
Hon och jag ser in i varann. Som att klättra uppför de vilt blom-
mande sluttningarna utan att känna den minsta trötthet. Vi är på

¹⁴ Cf. Espmark 1983, 147: "Stycket rymmer på det sättet ett politiskt engagemang som inte formuleras i klartext utan antyds med subtila medel och därför får en säregen styrka" ("The poem contains in this way a form of political commitment, which is not expressed in plain language but is suggested through subtle means and therefore acquires a singular strength").

¹⁵ "Two truths approach each other. One comes from inside / one comes from outside / and where they meet you have the chance to see yourself."

djursidan, välkomna, åldras inte. Men vi har upplevt så mycket tillsammans, det minns vi, också stunder då vi inte var mycket värda (som när vi köade för att ge den välmående jätten blod – han hade beordrat transfusion), händelser som skulle ha skilt oss om de inte hade förenat oss, och händelser som vi glömt tillsammans – men de har inte glömt oss! De blev stenar, mörka och ljusa. Stenarna i en förskingrad mosaik. Och nu händer det: skärvorna flyger samman, mosaiken blir till. Den väntar på oss. Den strålar från väggen i hotellrummet, en design våldsam och öm, kanske ett ansikte, vi hinner inte uppfatta allt när vi drar av oss kläderna.

I skymningen går vi ut. Uddens väldiga mörkblå tass ligger slängd i havet. Vi går in i människovirveln, knuffas omkring vänligt, mjuka kontroller, alla pratar ivrigt på det främmande språket. "Ingen människa är en ö." Vi blir starka av dem, men också av oss själva. Av det inom oss som den andre inte kan se. Det som bara kan möta sig själv. Den innersta paradoxen, garageblomman, ventilen mot det goda mörkret. En dryck som bubblar i tomma glas. En högtalare som utsänder tystnad. En gångstig som växer igen bakom varje steg. En bok som bara kan läsas i mörkret (Tranströmer 2011, 267-68).¹⁶

This *prosadikt* (prose poem) – a form which recurs quite often in Tranströmer's poetry – has been described by its author as a religious poem, one in which he tries to give shape to an idea of the divine which transcends confessional distinctions (Espmark 1983, 53-54).

¹⁶ "Funchal / The fish-restaurant on the beach, simple, a shack built by ship-wrecked people. Many turn away at the door, but not the gusts from the sea. A shadow stands in his reeking cabin frying two fish according to an old recipe from Atlantis, small explosions of garlic, oil running over the tomato slices, every bite saying that the ocean wishes us well, a humming from the deeps. / She and I look into each other. Like climbing up the wild blossoming hillsides without feeling the least tiredness. We're on the side of the animals, we're welcome, we don't get older. But over the years we've experienced so much together, we remember that, also times when we were good for nothing (as when we queued up to give blood to the flourishing giant – he'd ordered transfusions), things that would've separated us if they hadn't brought us closer, and things we forgot together – but they have not forgotten us. They've become stones, dark ones and light ones, stones in a scattered mosaic. And now it happens: the bits fly together, the mosaic is visible. It's waiting for us. It's shining from the wall in our hotel room, a design both violent and tender, perhaps a face, we haven't time to notice everything as we pull off our clothes. / At dusk we go out. The cape's enormous dark blue paw lies sprawled in the sea. We step into the human whirlpool, pushed around in a friendly way, soft controls, everyone chattering in that foreign language. 'No man is an island.' We become stronger through them, but also through ourselves, through that within us which the other can't see, which meets only itself. The innermost paradox, the garage flower, the ventilator to the good darkness. A drink that bubbles in empty glasses. A loudspeaker that sends out silence. A pathway that grows over again behind each step. A book that can be read only in the dark" (Tranströmer 2006, 159).

Although the title of the poem refers to the capital city of Madeira, unlike *Lissabon* most of the setting is not urban. The island of Madeira is here represented, rather allusively, in its natural beauty and simplicity, a place whose roots go deep down into the history of mankind. Indeed, the identification of Madeira with the legendary Atlantis, suggested by the phrase “enligt ett gammalt recept från Atlantis”,¹⁷ is meant to emphasise its symbolic value as a place which bears traces of a remote past.

The story of a man and a woman and their relationship with the past acquires in this context a metaphysical meaning. Their memories form a scattered mosaic which all of a sudden becomes visible, seemingly outlining a face.¹⁸ A face that suggests something higher than human life, something that becomes apparent when the man and the woman meet through the union of their bodies. The last lines of the third part contain the religious core of the whole poem. In them the poet tries to define the indefinable, to grasp ‘the innermost paradox’ in words, one which “kan endast fångas i symboler för en kommunikation som är omöjlig – men fungerar” (Espmark 1983, 54-55).¹⁹ Such a paradox is the presence of the divine in human life. In Tranströmer’s poetry, the notion of the dual nature of God – a notion that has its roots in a long tradition influenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy²⁰ – is widely present. The divinity is on the one hand an absolute entity outside of time and space, which is completely strange to human cognitive categories. On the other, it presupposes the existence of other beings and manifests itself in the multiplicity of the universe.

Thus, Madeira becomes a meeting place, the crossroads where the past – even the legendary past – and the present intersect. As such, the Portuguese island is one of those places, either physical or psychological, where – to cite the words from *Preludier* – an individual has the chance to see oneself.

Like any other place visited by Tranströmer, Portugal is a source of inspiration for his poetry, a liminal place where ends meet.

The two poems discussed above show some remarkable differences in tone and meaning. Whereas *Lissabon* is no doubt a poem about isolation and limitation, both represented by the prison in the physical and symbolic

¹⁷ The shadow (“skugga”) frying two fish, as described in the poem, might be intended by Tranströmer as an embodiment of a dead person from the legendary Atlantis. Another link with the legendary past is provided by the fish, which at the same time represent a union between the ocean, which “wishes us well”, and mankind.

¹⁸ *Minna ser mig* (*Memories Look at Me*) is both the title of a poem included in *Det vilda torget* (*The Wild Market Square*, 1983) and of Tranströmer’s autobiography (1993).

¹⁹ “Can be grasped only in symbols for a communication that is not possible, but which nevertheless works.”

²⁰ On the whole question see Espmark 1983, 39-54.

space of the city, *Funchal* is about freedom and solidarity.²¹

What these two poems seem to share about this distant country, lying at the westernmost extremity of Europe, is that both places described represent what is left of a remote past: Alfama has survived the terrible earthquake of 1755, while Madeira might be what is left of Atlantis. Thus, both places exude a symbolic depth as witnesses of a bygone world, an outer world that meets the inner world of the 'lyrical I'. The two places, so different and yet so similar, question the poet about different themes such as the lack of freedom on the one hand, and the presence of the divine in human life on the other. In addition, the theme of the poet's relationship with his fellow human beings and, more broadly, social beings, is connected with the reflection on the mysteries of the human soul. All these themes, however, are ultimately linked to each other by a common interest in the relationship between past and present, a relationship that both Lisbon and Madeira evoke in the poet's mind in a powerful way.

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²¹ It is tempting to explain the different atmosphere in *Funchal* as deriving from the end of the regime in 1974. However, from Espmark's note about Tranströmer's journey to Madeira we do not know when exactly the poet visited the Atlantic island, i.e., whether before or after the Carnation Revolution.