

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 71 (2022)

Artikel: Am Wortgrund : zur Poetik im Werk Göran Tunströms
Autor: Dettwiler, Lukas
Kapitel: 5: Abstract & Keywords
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-981561>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

5 Abstract & Keywords

Preliminary remarks

Göran Tunström (1937–2000) has been during decades one of the best-loved writers in Sweden with roots in Selma Lagerlöfs (1858–1940) tracks. Both of them come from the province Värmland, well-known for its prose tradition, rich in flourishing fantasy (“skröna” is the stylistic term for this type of narrative.) Lagerlöf lived in her mansion “Mårbacka” near Sunne, whereas the son of Hugo Tunström – the second pastor of Sunne – grew up more than a generation later in the parsonage of this old market town and was raised on the Word of God his father praised.

A striking feature of Tunström’s texts is that they are within and besides the narrative, enriched with *ord*/word passages occasionally emerging like ‘lagoons’, isolated parts, in which the word ‘word’ (Swedish ‘ord’) is the theme or words are thematized. These *ord*/word passages are the subject of this investigation. They are found throughout his work, across all the genres the author cultivated. The reflection of words is a topic that is at the center of all his books: lyric, narrative and dramatic texts. By gathering sentences that reflect on words and categorizing them throughout some selected narratives from the author’s oeuvre from the debut to his latest (posthumous) publication, this study tries to show the evolution of the writer’s relationship to (his poetic) language. The prospective results are that words, for Tunström, possesses the quality to create a sacred space: a universe, a cosmos, a sacred materiality, kept within a (sacred) book. At the same time, however, these sacred words are just means and door-openers. They are aids, scaffoldings to the ‘real’ dialogue with the world.

The typification into these three layers or uses of the word has its correspondence in the structure of the present work. The evidence presented in the study of Tunström’s word thus illustrates three positions in the philosophy of language. The pragmatic position, as represented by Wittgenstein, serves as a foil for Chapter 2. Chapter 3 engages with the postmodern position on linguistic semiosis, as prominently argued by Derrida. Finally, chapter 4 focuses on a mystically afflicted conception of language, which, with Genette, can be described as a mimological one.

The approach presented here of researching the use of words in the author’s complete oeuvre thus deliberately deviates from this. The research on his writings has been so far distinguished itself primarily by narratological studies with special attention to the novels *Tjuven* (The Thief) and *Juloratoriet* (The Christmas Oratorio).

Aim of the study

The aim is the exploration of the phenomenon of Tunström’s usage of the term ‘word’. Tunström’s ongoing word-reflection and -reflexivity in his texts, as well as the author’s reflection on language, form the claim of the investigation. What do the word-moments, which Tunström weaves into the narration and which have an effect on his work like a word chain, ‘say’? The work thus attempts to expose individual links of this ‘chain’, to make

them visible and to examine them separately as well as in their respective contexts in order to gain insight into their poetics.

The inventory and the exploration of the development, alteration, variation, modification and transformation of these ‘sentences reflecting on words’ at times self-reflexive sentences can be a key to the interpretation and translation of Tunström’s literary universe, obsessed with the (poetic) question of handling and reflection of words, ideally, to his Poetics.

Can an author’s entire writing practice, even his or her poetics, be read through the word alone, through the occurrences of representative, excerpted *ord*/word passages?

Corpus

The following basic consideration has guided the question: How can Tunström’s appellative use of the word in his writings be collected, commented upon, and qualified? First, it was necessary to clarify whether and to what extent the word phenomenon characterized his entire writing. The “longitudinal reading” focused on the *ord*/word passages, the reading of his complete works, showed that they are found everywhere. For this reason, it was necessary to determine those book titles whose word-places were to be transferred into lists. In order to be able to observe the phenomenon over the entire work, however, a restriction in the form of a selective longitudinal analysis was necessary. Logically, the books from the phases were examined: debut (years) – middle creative period – late work. In concrete terms, this meant from 1958 to 2003, from the poetry collection *Inringing* to the piecemeal essay novel *Försök med ett århundrade*.

Methodological approach

A classical semiotic approach proved to be productive, which in its core deals with the relation of signs to the world. This relation is debated in Tunström’s texts in various ways, whereby the different relations, in which the relation of signs to the world is considered, can be assigned to theoretical positions from the history of the philosophy of language. In the macrostructure, this assignment determines the three-part structure of my work.

The extensive appellative use of the word in Tunström’s work is unique in (recent) Swedish literature. By “appellative” is meant the invocation, the highlighting, the naming of the word *ord*/word itself in the text, and thus the author’s pronounced invocation of the word. Hence there are no models for texts of this kind, which have shaped an entire literary oeuvre with a similarly high or comparable consistency of word-naming, words and words punched into the text, their *ord*/word-places (Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich*, like Sartre’s *Les mots*, is partially an exception). This means that for this ductus of word usage there are no reliable studies so far, and therefore a method had to be developed first in order to approach the phenomenon from a literary-scientific point of view.

A simple contextualizing description proved to be a sensible approach to interpretation. For the specific, idiosyncratic metanarrative connection of the author with the word (and thus the text) cannot be adequately explained by any conventional (word) poetics. Even the approach of Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s *Aesthetics of Verbal Art* (engl. 1979), which concentrates primarily on the phenomenon of polyphony in the novel, proved to be insufficient for the investigation and could therefore be consulted only marginally (Bakhtin’s concept of a polyphonic prose – derived from the novels of Rabelais, Gogol, and Dostoevsky – hardly

touches the word poetics as it can be observed in Tunström, especially since the author does not maintain a subversive or polemical relationship to the word, but – as it will be shown – an appellative one). Because of this lack of tested reference points, a makeshift method had to be found and conceived specifically.

The study makes the shift by repeatedly questioning the text from within, along its inter- and intra-textual “lagoons” – word-islands – so that the recursive reading approaches each examined word with the method for which Jean Bollack (1923–2012) coined the term *lecture insistante*. Additional aids were the ‘listening to the text’ method propagated by Mats Malm and the attempt of ‘translated reading’ and “constellating reading” by Peter Utz. The present work makes use of these approaches as well: it combines analytical reading with ‘reading differently’ in the sense of ‘reading translated’ with the insistently auscultating reading.

As a counterbalance to all analytical approach, the writings of Edmond Jabès (1912-1991) brought a serendipitous value to the text understanding. “The rabbis, as you know, are the masters of commentary.” Throughout his life, the Jewish poet made language and words, indeed the book itself, the subject of his thought. His reflections opened up an unexpected broadening of horizons for the research approach and allowed Tunström’s work to be seen in a larger literary and intellectual-historical context.

Structure of the study

The study is subdivided into three parts. Each of them exemplifies a prominent usage of Tunström use of words. Every chapter stands paradigmatically for a layer of word (‘Wortschicht’) or for a linguistic-philosophical position. In chapter 2 the focus lies on word-emanations from *Prästungen*, the book of his childhood and adolescence. Chapter 3 examines three different texts and their ‘words’ belonging to the author’s late work: *Krönikor* (Columns), *En prosaist i New York* (A prosaist in New York), *Försök med ett århundrade* (Essay with a century). In order to illustrate chapter 4, word passages will again be explored by samples from the authors intermedium phase found in the two novels *De heliga geograferna* (The holy geographers) and *Guddöttrarna* (Goddaughters).

Chapter 2

The *PROLOG* is dedicated to the discovery of words, their imitation, leading to language acquisition (and in the end to the ‘author’). A clear pragmatic understanding of language with clear reference of signifiant and signifié is dominant. The many *ord*/word passages rather show the seriousness of his linguistic playful questioning and problematizing of the holy word.

The phase “debut” is not to be understood strictly work-chronologically, since the main theme here is *Prästungen*; the tale is of particular relevance for the development of the author’s usage of the word. In it, the word shows its initial pragmatic function, as a close word-thing relationship, as a sign for a thing, as evidenced by the examples of the “indicative teaching of words”, the position already held by Augustine and further built upon by Wittgenstein. The child learns to recognize the world of words. Jonas Pfister on “Das Gesagte” in Augustine and Wittgenstein: “When Augustine characterizes the word as a sign for a thing, the thing must be conceived once as a concrete object, once as a

conceptual content. Later in the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein developed his theory of the use of meaning on the basis of a theory he ascribes to Augustine.”

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 – POETALOG tries to trace the literary or poetic word in Tunström’s work, also in its intertextuality. The tradition of his models, superfathers. The clear linguistic reference starts to slide, the word detaches itself from its pragmatic sign function, gains autonomy in relation to reality, the reference to reality is no longer ontologically grounded, but becomes contingent.

Tunström’s postmodern concept of sign can be found most vividly in his late work in the two quite different books *Försök med ett århundrade* and *En prosaist i New York*, and partly also in his collection of columns *Krönikor*. The word is arbitrary, to speak with Ferdinand de Saussure, but now signifier and signified moreover get into a slide. The author makes an “autonomous” use of words, fictionally creating a world that obeys an open and wild semiosis. The “prosaist” in his *A Prosaist in New York* experiences “the pleasure of drifting” (Eco 2004: 429), “which is entirely in gliding from one sign to the next, and there are no destinations outside the pleasure of the labyrinthine journey through signs and things.” The author creates and mixes fact with fiction. References to realities are unhinged or anchored, or simply suspended, as has been theorized by many of the postmodern thinkers in the philosophy of language (Derrida, Lacan, and others).

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 *EPILOG* explores the Word of God in Tunström’s oeuvre and its emphasis. The influences of the prototypical “creation and redemption word[s]” of sacred scripture are discernible, the total (mimological) fusion signifiant/signifié. Word does not signify, but it creates its own reality. Word can become substance (‘flesh’).

The two novels reveal the author’s primarily mimological use of the word, postulating “the similarity between words and ‘things’.” The novels constitute a cardinal stage in his work. With them he does not only open his middle creative period, the many *ord*/word passages rather show the seriousness of his linguistic playful questioning and problematizing of the sacred word, of speechlessness, of silence as well as of stillness. The examples from this middle creative period indicate the source from which Tunström’s work creates and invents itself, from which the author’s originally religious connection to the word (of God) and thus to the (holiness of) language can be read: By his engagement with the Word, practiced throughout his writing life, which he transcends with language theory and theology in the most diverse ways, in a *unio mystica*, to a poetry of words. Divine language is mimological.

This refers to the circular movement of language in becoming, growing, vanishing or framed in the symbol of Sonnabend Dix in *Försök med ett århundrade* (FÖR: 279): “Ändock rymmer det [vårt furstendöme] allt som bör rymmas för att livet – i all sin löjligen stor- och litenhet – skall kunna uppstå, växa och slockna: narraktiga prinsar, undersåtar och översåtar.” [And yet it (sc. our principality) offers room for everything, so that life – in all its ridiculous size as well as smallness – can come into being, grow and pass away: foolish princes, subjects and authorities.]

Findings

Tunström's oeuvre is full of echoes of a "Tower of Babel" of languages. Together, their speakers create a 'world', "wandering / into the language, onto / our common fields" (Tunström). At the word pole his language ignites. On the threshold between dead letter and meaning, his words become texts that co-reflect and re-aspect the word (in all its meanings), as if he had just come into contact with this logosphere and was marveling at its effect.

The *ord*/word passages discussed here and in the other two chapters from his work of over 40 years are in many cases testimony to a new beginning. As exposed in Chapter 2, they enable world knowledge. Chapter 3 has shown that they form the essence for world discovery. The evidence in chapter 4 accentuates their potential for understanding the wor(l)d of beliefs and religions.

Keywords

Augustine, Andersson (Lars), Aspenström, Aurell, Bachtin, Bible, Bollack, Cohen, Cronqvist, Derrida, Dürrenmatt, Eco, Jabès, Hansson, Jensen, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Malm, Strindberg, Utz, Wittgenstein, intertextuality, text-image-intermediality, translation.