

A Comment on Annemarie Schwarzenbach's East

Patricia Almarcegui. Lecturer of Comparative Literature, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya

Literature is always a journey towards the unknown myth, a movement of which Annemarie Schwarzenbach was surprisingly aware during her life. The Swiss writer, whose work has been passed on to us in a fragmented and incomplete form, went on various excursions into the East. The fruit of this led to a series of splendid reflections on the people, the individuals and the landscape captured in a number of books. The sensitivity of her view and the perspective of overseas as being something of her own, distanced from the clichés of a western writer, become fascinating as a form of basic learning and getting to know oneself.

Reading Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908-1942) is a fascinating experience because nobody as much as her has realised that literature is a journey in itself. The movement of travelling along with that of writing as shown in this Swiss traveller's texts reflects many worries of the contemporary thought. The writing becomes a favoured aspect of life. The travelling is a view of existence and existence, a view of travelling. Since her literary beginnings, she used this as a metaphor, giving it shape as a characteristic of her *poetics of mobility*: "Our life is like a journey... and more than an adventure and an excursion to unknown regions, the journey is like a condensed view of our existence."¹ In correspondence with her close

friends, Klaus and Erika Mann, she uses a sort of wandering traveller as a recurring image.² With no established destination, life becomes associated with the second element that makes up the structure of travelling, *transit*, which is characterised by movement and by being in the middle, between the uncertainty of leaving and arriving. Happiness is the absence of tension, life should be movement.³ You should be neither sedentary, nor satisfied, you do well by setting off.⁴ The journey, in classical terms – departure, transit and arrival – disappears and it is projected in the conditions of the first travellers of antiquity, condemned to roam and wander.⁵ The mythical character of the journey is transferred to the life of Schwarzenbach, who

1. A. Schwarzenbach, *Alle Wege sind offen*, Basel, Lenos, 2003. (English edition: *Death in Persia*, Drumlummon Views, Spring-Summer, 2006. Translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach).

2. "Wanderers lacking any certainty, without any consistency or greatness, and without models," letter from Schwarzenbach to Erika Mann, 1 July 1933, in A. Schwarzenbach, K. Mann and E. Mann, *Wir werden es schon zu Wege bringen, das Leben*, 2001, p. 117.

3. D.L. Miermont, *Annemarie Schwarzenbach ou le mal d'Europe*, Paris, Payot, 2004, p. 53.

4. A. Schwarzenbach, *Freunde um Bernhardt*, 1993, p. 47.

5. On the traveller and the exile, see also: S. Rohlf, *Exil als praxis*, 2002; and on the traveller and nomadism, H. Karenbrock, "Nomadische Bewegung. Annemarie Schwarzenbachs Fallkuckuck", *Annemarie Schwarzenbach. Analysen und Erstdrucke*, 2005, pp. 60-74.

lived it as if it were an epic. Always reaching the limits and under the permanent tension and intensity characteristic of the German-speaking generation of the period between the wars. In these circumstances, her descriptions, which try to recover the simultaneousness of that seen on the journey, are filled with rhetoric figures that indicate the movement to which the interior of the traveller is subjected: "In Anatolia, there is a symphony of heat, a spectacular metamorphosis [...]. The journey across the Taurus by car is like a metamorphosis, a change of scene. The landscapes start moving."⁶

The episodic character of the journey and the intensity caused by it are the ideas that best define the value of the itinerary. Throughout the journey, each event is carried out as if it were the last; by contrast, in everyday life, the consciousness of the episodes is lost: "This is the greatest danger of a long journey [...]: it is all summed up as if it were the last time [...]. In everyday life [...], the consciousness of the *episodes* is lost, it is easy to think that every day contributes to constructing an event and it is forgotten that this will come to an end one day or one night."⁷ And the time and space of the intensity of the journey should be expressed from memory. Schwarzenbach searches for order, a structure of a tale closer to the experience of the journey, and she finds it in the faculty of *remembering*. Recollections organise the tale and situate it before one of the characteristics of contemporary travel writing. There is no chronological succession and what is seen predominates, it does not progress in a spatial-temporal order: "You have to *remember*, and although we do not let go of our recollec-

tions for even a instant – I do not and, without a doubt, nor do my travelling companions – at least we do not have to know anything about it."⁸ Recollections allow us to fix our memory and reproduce the emotions of the journey. Memory emerges as a possibility and a freer order to express the distancing of the referent in the itinerary. Schwarzenbach interprets reality and describes it with the freedom of someone who knows that his or her experience is the only possible *pre-text* or textual search. For this, she represents her figurative world and summons up sensations as ways of anchoring the destination. Persia is her preferred destination to express the *poetics of mobility* of her interior: "Persia is not a destination, just one great experience."⁹

The episodic character of the journey and the intensity caused by it are the ideas that best define the value of the itinerary

Between 1933 and 1939, Schwarzenbach travelled to the East four times. The first time, in 1933, as a reporter for the weekly *Zürcher Illustrierte*. She spent seven months accompanying a group of archaeologists established in Istanbul and visited Persia. A year later, she collaborated on the American excavations of the Joint Expedition to Persia in Rayy (45 km from Tehran and at the foot of Mount Damavand) and lived there for three months. In 1935, recently wed to the diplomat Claude Clarac, she undertook a journey by car. Together they went through Beirut, Palmyra, Mosul, Iranian Kurdistan, until they installed themselves in Prince Firuz's reception pavilion in Farmanieh

6. A. Schwarzenbach, *Winter in Vorderasien. Tagebuch einer Reise*, 1989, p. 53.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

8. A. Schwarzenbach, *Death in Persia*, Drumlummon Views, Spring-Summer 2006. Translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach.

9. Letter from Schwarzenbach to Erika Mann, 4 July 1934, in A. Schwarzenbach, K. Mann and E. Mann, *Wir werden es schon zu Wege bringen, das Leben*, 2001, p. 117.

(20 km from Tehran), where they stayed for a period of three months. During the stay, she came down with malaria and travelled with a group of English archaeologists to Ray once again. Fruit of these three journeys are the travel diaries *Winter in Vorderasien. Tagebuch einer Reise* (1934); the “impersonal diary”¹⁰ *Tod in Persien [Death in Persia]* (1995); the poetic narration *Das glückliche Tal* (1940), and the volume of stories *Bei diesem Regen* (1989). In 1939, she went on her last journey to Persia en route to Afghanistan with the Swiss traveller Ella Maillart. They were both at the zenith of their careers. They travelled in a Ford Roadster Deluxe; the view from their car runs through the work and becomes the vehicle of existential wandering. Schwarzenbach writes, fruit of the journey, *Alle Wege sind offen. Die Reise nach Afghanistan (1939-1949)* (2000) and Maillart, *La voie cruelle* (1947).

In this approach, we do not find the earlier traveller who escaped in search for a lost dream or paradise, but someone who finds in the East a way of maintaining a critical attitude towards Europe

Schwarzenbach travelled to Persia for no special reason. Probably because it was there that the oldest remains of writing had been found, the tablets of carved symbols, or because it was visited by Gertrude Bell and Vita Sackville-West (sources of her journeys) or because it was a destiny far away from the imminent war. They visited Iran and Turkey just at the time when the shah Pahlavi and Kemal Atatürk were taking office and “westernisation” (for-

mation of modern secular state) was taking place in both countries. Schwarzenbach questions the way in which this was being carried out and wonders if it would be an improvement for the two countries: “J. Bey, the director of the railways in this district [Kayseri], welcomes us and takes us into his heated office. He is a representative of that Turkish generation that the new state is prepared to sacrifice [...]. He untiringly repeats the word *civilisation* and lists the points of the programme, the innovations, the games over progress [...]. What frightens us most is the form adopted, the propaganda, the manipulation of the masses. But what is important is information, tolerance and reason.”¹¹ In Palestine, she observes in a similar way: “It is possible that this world is today about to decompose. A people accustomed to freedom cannot put up for long with contact with western power that obliges them to abide by their laws.”¹² In this approach, we do not find the earlier traveller who escaped in search for a lost dream or paradise, but someone who finds in the East a way of maintaining a critical attitude towards Europe. Schwarzenbach leaves moved by the unbreathable atmosphere of the continent¹³ but, at the same time, the East situates her in front of a fight that is to accompany her all through her life: to adapt her social commitment to the search for individual happiness. In her articles “Frauen von Kabul” (“Women of Kabul”) and “Im Garten der schönen Mädchen con Kaiser” (“In the garden of the young beauties of Qaisar [Afghanistan]”), she makes use of her theoretical speech on eastern women to denounce the condition of the woman in Europe: “For these women in Qaisar, Kabul,

10. According to the words of the author (*Death in Persia*, Drumlummon Views, Spring-Summer 2006. Translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach).

11. A. Schwarzenbach, *Winter in Vorderasien. Tagebuch einer Reise*, 1989, p. 30.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

13. “We’ve got to leave Europe, it demands too much patience,” Schwarzenbach in a letter to Erika Mann, 2 January 1932, in A. Schwarzenbach, K. Mann and E. Mann, *Wir werden es schon zu Wege bringen, das Leben*, 2001, p. 73.



Annemarie Schwarzenbach.

this is a vast world, civilisation. Consequently, they have learnt to read and write – at home, of course – and they know where India, Moscow, Paris or even Switzerland is. However, they have never travelled and cannot even imagine going more than a day's journey away from Mazar-e Sharif, the capital of Afghan Turkestan.

But, is it necessary to discover the world, have another life? [...]. We cannot imagine such an existence. But, do these women seem to be particularly unhappy? Can you desire something which is unknown to you? Is it good and necessary to educate them, instruct them and then leave them in the venom of dissatisfaction?"¹⁴

14. A. Schwarzenbach, *Alle Wege sind offen*, 2003, p. 66.

On many occasions, Schwarzenbach seems to have been a responsible traveller, closer to the traveller of the second half of the 20th century. This is shown by her speech on the *exotic* – that which is found away from experience – which she considers not to be part of the object of her itinerary and which she does not identify in her descriptions: “At the beginning, having given in to the grandiose landscape, to its magnificent colours and forms [...], we experience exotic ways of life, firstly with curiosity, then with resistance, but at some time our resistance abandons us.”¹⁵

Unlike so many other European travellers, the East is not the “other” for Schwarzenbach. She does not describe it as something strange. She, distant in her interior to herself, discovered the same strangeness in the destination

From her gender condition and the knowledge that women have not been represented or representable, she dedicates large fragments to the situation of women in the East. As could be no other way, the state of visibility or invisibility produced by the veil is one of her recurring themes. During her stay in Tehran in 1935, she relates how the women feel after shah Pahlavi’s prohibition to wear the *kula*, or peaked cap, that had still allowed them to hide themselves after the prohibition of the use of the chador and veil in public. Unprotected, ashamed and embarrassed, Persian women lowered their heads so as to continue to be invisible, a condition to which they were accustomed. Also of interest for the historical moment that it describes,

Schwarzenbach’s text discredits this prohibition imposed against feminine desire: “Exemplary organisation, frankly western! [...] But where was the shah going to find a model for the founding of the old and yearned for human rights?”¹⁶ Persia is also the place par excellence of the poetic truth and, therefore, of writing and civilisation: “This country is by no means primitive; it presents itself, on the contrary, as an old land rich in history and it arouses respect and curiosity around it. It is understandable how it was so easy for the Arabs to interrupt its past, deprive it of its religion that it replaced with Islam; and it is easier to understand why, later, the legends of Firdusi acquired a traditional and national status.”¹⁷

Unlike so many other European travellers, the East is not the “other” for Schwarzenbach. She does not describe it as something strange. She, distant in her interior to herself, discovered the same strangeness in the destination. In such circumstances, interior and exterior coincide and are not differentiated: “You would have to transform yourself into a segment of desert, into a fragment of mountain, into a strip of evening sky. You would have to entrust yourself to the country and understand one another. Live in *opposition* to it is such audacity that one would die of fright.”¹⁸ The East is not alien to her; it is the mirror of her destiny. Both she and Persia are so greatly distanced from the rest of the world that the descriptions of the landscape coincided with the loss of their identities. Before the superhuman immeasurableness of the surroundings which the traveller repeatedly and rhetorically emphasised, she dissolves into

15. A. Schwarzenbach, *Death in Persia*, Drumlummon Views, Spring-Summer 2006. Translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

17. A. Schwarzenbach, *Winter in Vorderasien*, 1989, p. 142.

18. A. Schwarzenbach, *Das glückliche Tal*, 2006, p. 54.

the referent: "We are now accustomed to the way we are in this country: we are not free even for an instant, we are not *ourselves*: we become the property of something alien and are distanced from our very own hearts."¹⁹

Persia coincided with her internal reality. There she discovered desertion, silence and nothingness and, alone and alienated, she found resonance in her writing. Narration was no longer the transparent regulating *glance* and the adaptation to the described object that characterised the traveller from antiquity, but a *vision*. The traveller's writing became tied to her life and the events of which brought forth her literary subjects. *Death in Persia* represents, perhaps due to its diary nature and its frank and desperate style, the most pertinent work for the analysis of this condition. During her stay on the archaeological excavation site in the valley of Lahr, she discovered death. The valley is the place of no return, the end of the world. But as a paradox words came forth. There she was once again thrown into solitude. A voice told her that once she reached the depths of desperation, her salvation would be next. In the valley, she accepted her destiny: the pain of impotence and resignation, the dead future. There she found and lost her love, Yalé, a Turkish girl who she met at a party organised by the Foreign Secretary, and who she found ill. They hardly exchanged words. The prohibition from her father for them to see each other is firm. Judging by a letter to Klaus Mann, she was thinking of running away with Yalé to Istanbul. The next day, Schwarzenbach had to be operated urgently on her foot. During the eight days she spent in hospital, Yalé only went to visit her once. The next day, the state

of health of the young Turk was so alarming that her father had her taken to the Russian hospital in Tehran. The traveller goes to the excavation in the valley. She knew that Yalé was going to die, but did not visit her despite her burning desire to be at her side. And she did not go because: "You know that no human can penetrate, even for the briefest of an instant, into the heart of another and unify itself with it."²⁰ This visit that never came to be supposes the figurative death for the traveller and her meeting with her internal reality in and with the East.

The East for Schwarzenbach was a place in which to question and criticise the representation and representability of the feminine condition

The East for Schwarzenbach was a place in which to question and criticise the representation and representability of the feminine condition. Likewise, it was a space in which to question the ideas that took Europe to a profound social and political crisis and the knowledge that the projection of this in Turkey and Iran should be undertaken in a different way so as to obtain different results. But, above all, the East was the space for the journey of writing. They share the movement, transit, the difficulties and the wandering. Writing became a possible *place* for the traveller who narrated as a form of privately auto-defining herself in the intimate space of immersion in writing that allowed her *to come to be*. A double journey, the transit to the East and her writing are ways of crossing the world by "creating" experience.

19. A. Schwarzenbach, *Death in Persia*, Drumlummon Views, Spring-Summer 2006. Translated from the German by Chris Schwarzenbach.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 132.