

The Cracking of Eggs: Exploring Genre, Hypotexts, and Interpretative Gaps in Peer Hultberg's *The Town and the World* (*Byen og Verden*, 1992)

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Abstract

This paper examines hitherto unexplored issues of genre, transtextual references, unity, and coherence in Peer Hultberg's novel *The Town and the World* (*Byen og Verden*, 1992). Systematic research on Hultberg has largely ceased after 2010, paradoxically after his complete *Nachlass* became freely available. Certain literary allusions and genre conventions—referred to by the author both in his lifetime and in his posthumously published self-analytical writings—have not yet been explored. In my article I critically compare these findings with the transtextual references indicated by the author and supplement the existing data with new insights. Furthermore, the question of the unity of the novel's seemingly independent stories has remained unresolved. Using the framework of the so-called composite novel, introduced by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, I propose a new reading of the hundred texts as a coherent, interrelated whole.

Keywords

Peer Hultberg, *Byen og Verden*, genre, transtextuality, composite novel

"And is the seed the synthesis of the flower or the flower of the seed?"¹

1 Introduction

The evolution and revival of literary forms and archetypes since antiquity was a central concern throughout the Danish author Peer Hultberg's (1935–2007) writing career. It is thus not surprising that his most celebrated novel, *The Town and the World* (*Byen og Verden*, 1992), exemplifies the idea that an entire storyworld can emerge from a single egg, as Horace describes in his *Ars Poetica* with reference to the Trojan War and its literary representations. One of the most striking features of Hultberg's novel is its manifold rebirths and evocations of genres, myths, archetypes, hypotexts, autobiographical elements, and authorial masks, which together form an idiosyncratic and almost inextricable network of inventions. At the same time, the complex form of the novel engages with the Plutarchian causality dilemma, operating with the same metaphor of the bird and the egg—or, in other terms, the flower and the seed. *The Town and the World* is thus a nested system of miniature novels, in which it is deliberately undecidable whether the composition depends on the elements or the elements on the composition.

¹ "Og er frøet blomstens syntese eller blomsten frøets?" (Hultberg 2005, 305). All translations are mine, if not otherwise indicated.

In the first section of this paper, I discuss the genre of the text and present a number of possible new approaches that can coexist with scholarly contributions to date. By enumerating genre conventions, narrative techniques, direct or indirect references to works of specific authors *qua* hypotexts, my aim is to contribute to the study of the transtextual background of *The Town and the World*.² In the second part, I shall focus on a single interpretative hiatus to demonstrate that the preceding observations are far from arbitrary philological hypotheses. While critics, readers, and scholars frequently highlight the rich and complex referential background of the novel, few have ventured to investigate its individual themes and motifs in depth. This paper thus also seeks to serve as a point of departure for my—and hopefully other scholars’—further research into the underrated, labyrinthine world of *The Town and the World*.

Since Peer Hultberg’s name is unfortunately almost completely unknown to the English-speaking world due to the lack of translations,³ it is necessary to introduce his oeuvre and the novel in question in a few words. Peer Hultberg was a Danish playwright and author of prose fiction from the second half of the twentieth century. Although originally trained as a Slavist specialising in Polish literature, after several years in the academic world abroad and in his home country, he decided to become a Jungian psychoanalyst and graduated at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zürich in 1978. He spent the rest of his life as a practising analyst in Hamburg until his death in 2007. Even though he spoke more languages up to full professional proficiency and was an expatriate for most of his life, Danish remained his only linguistic medium in literature. Hultberg’s style can be characterised as a creative mingling of classical modernists’ writing strategies (especially those of Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Karin Boye, T. S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein)⁴ combined with a strong attraction to epic grandiosity. He became especially celebrated for his last three novels, *Requiem* (1985), *Præludier* (1989) and *Byen og Verden* (1992).⁵

For the latter, which he regarded as his last literary achievement during his lifetime and around which my paper will revolve, he won the Nordic Council Literature Prize, the most prestigious literary award in Scandinavia, in 1993. *The Town and the World* is, as it refers to itself, a novel of one hundred texts (“roman i hundrede tekster”) which are marked only with Roman numerals. The novel does

² Throughout this study, the terms transtext, hypotext, intertext, and paratext, alongside their derivatives are understood as defined by Genette (1997). It is, though, important to note that the term intertext, initially coined by Julia Kristeva, was not intended to denote the historical connection between authors (*intersubjectivity*), but rather the transposition of sign-systems (i.e. texts) to another (*intertextuality*, Kristeva and Moi 1986:passim).

³ The only translation of *The Town and the World* known to me is by W. Glyn Jones (1928–2014), however, it has never been published (van der Liet 1999:217). Unfortunately, research also came to a halt after 2010, even though the author’s complete *Nachlass* is now publicly accessible at the Royal Library of Copenhagen. The last scholarly papers appeared in the thematic issue (a collection of conference proceedings) of the Danish journal *Bogens Verden* which was entirely devoted to the author.

⁴ This list is mainly based on general observations and the author’s own remarks from the following publications: Hultberg 1995, 2005, 2009.

⁵ On the question of whether Hultberg can be elevated to the canon of European and world literature on the basis of the content, ideology, inspiration, and reception of his works, see van der Liet 2010:51–55.

not have a chronological plot or a clearly distinguished main hero;⁶ most of the texts are short biographies that begin *in medias res* at specific moments of the protagonists' lives. Others are independent anecdotes about scandalous events, families, smaller communities, and social affairs in the fictionalised city of Viborg in the twentieth century, yet always with a sharp focus on how these affect the individual fate of a town inhabitant. A considerable amount of characters appear more than once, albeit usually in different roles. There is no single narrator, instead, the narrating agent is either an undefined group of inhabitants ('we'), the personified rumour and gossip, or an extradiegetic storyteller. Rhetorically, the narrator uses an often archaic vocabulary, extensive syntactic structures, complex adjective phrases with at least one degree adverb, puns, alliterative or anaphoric iterations, paradoxical juxtapositions, and poetic images.⁷

2 Research History to Date and a Word on the Method

Peer Hultberg was a rather withdrawn individual, both as a private person and as a narrator, who rarely allowed readers behind the scenes. However, as, for instance, in his posthumously published *Selvbiografi* (Hultberg 2009), he occasionally provided clues to his storyworld. Yet the reader has to take these with due caution, as Hultberg never wanted to reveal his motivations completely, and many of these notes serve to open new avenues for interpretation, rather than to provide direct explanations. Therefore, the references concerning *The Town and the World* found in his essays and private writings can yield valuable insights, as well as open hidden interpretative pathways. In the first analytical section of this study, I shall follow these clues to explore where these pathways lead the reader in Hultberg's own multicursal garden of forking paths.

Before doing so, however, I shall present a brief literature review of studies that provide a backdrop for the present investigation, and I shall use one scholarly contribution to illustrate how fruitful a reference based, transtextual approach can be. To date, only a few scholars have undertaken a nearly complete text-immanent and transtextual reading of the oeuvre. Thomas Thurah and Jacob Greve demonstrated convincingly how archetypes from Greek mythology and the Joycean influence had an impact on composition and style by tracing the path suggested by the author in an otherwise reticent foreword to a prose anthology from 1995.⁸ Ping Huang (2000) selects some metaphors from various writings

⁶ Although Povl Hestlund and his fragmentary biography, arching over chapters I, LI and C, has led Thurah (2002), Pelle (1993) and Lærkesen (1993) to regard him as the catalyst behind the succession of seemingly autonomous narratives.

⁷ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of ChatGPT (GPT-5 mini) in reviewing and refining the English of this article. The AI, alongside various English academic phrasebanks, was consulted after the completion of the double-blind peer review process, and I retained or rejected its suggestions at my discretion. All interpretative analyses, arguments, and conclusions are entirely my own. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the following colleagues whom I consulted while working on the present article: Bjørn Bredal, Joanna Cymbrikiewicz, Christian Dalager, Jacob Greve, Joan Holst Møller, Peter Q. Rannes, Søren Schou, Sándor Tatár, Thomas Thurah.

⁸ Not surprisingly, Greve (2006) considers a fictive personality, Lieutenant Colonel Clockk from text XXXVII and LXXVI to have been inspired by Mogens Boisen (1910–1987), the Danish translator of the *Ulysses* who held a reading in Viborg in 1951. This was subsequently confirmed in Hultberg's autobiography: "Foredraget må have været i 1951 og

and applies them to the author's texts as symbolic cryptograms. Lærkesen (1993) interprets Hultberg's oeuvre as a set of intertexts in which *The City and the World* is also made up of intertexts cross-referring to each other. However, the most creative reading of the transtexts, symbolic clues, and references can be found in a short article by Erik Pelle. In it, Pelle (1993) refers to an interview with the author after receiving the Nordic Council Literature Prize: When Hultberg was asked whether he was working on a new novel, he answered allegorically that he had been collecting eggs for a while but did not want to crack them before he knew which type of cake he wanted to bake. Pelle reads this wording as an allusion to the "eggman" Povl Hestlund from narratives I, LI and C, and explores how the symbol of the egg can be interpreted as a reference to H. C. Andersen's tale *The Ugly Duckling*. According to Pelle, Andersen's story can be interpreted as a miniaturised variant of the *Künstlerroman*, and the hundred biographies in Hultberg's novel are tragic parodies of this subgenre of the novel. The assumption is reinforced by the fact that Hultberg was well-known for transforming subjective experiences into objective fiction.⁹ The teenage years in his autobiography are structured and framed in the manner of an exemplary *Künstlerroman*: Hultberg wanted to become a professional pianist, an "individually creating artist" ("selvstændig skabende kunstner", Hultberg 2009), but his environment, his parents and the lack of talent prevented him from doing so. Pelle's hypothesis is thus a plausible explanation and a logical decoding of the riddle on the eggs.

Consequently, we have no reason to doubt that a close reading of the hitherto underresearched elements around *The City and the World* in the Hultbergian text universe can yield new findings. It is important to note that, as a dyed-in-the-wool Jungian analyst Hultberg regarded human culture as a manifestation of the collective unconscious. My investigation therefore goes beyond a mechanical explication of the para- and intratextual cross-references to explore possible junctions that extend far beyond the authorial intention, thereby highlighting the autonomy of the text and its interpretative potential.

3 A Handful of Eggs to Crack: Generic Hypotexts and Interpretative Gaps around *The Town and the World*

To my knowledge, no scholarly studies to date have devoted special attention to the fact that Peer Hultberg was trained as a Slavist and to how this training may have impacted his narrative style. In their papers, Berzelius Steglich (2009), Ping Huang (1999) and van der Liet (1999) cite Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller* (1936), Mikhail Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel* (1934), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), and *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the*

i løbet af det følgende år havde jeg fået læst *Ulysses* tre gange. Og jeg tror at jeg kan sige at Ulysses og derigennem dette foredrag af Boisen blev grundlag for alt hvad jeg selv har forsøgt inden for litteraturen." (Hultberg 2009).

⁹ See, e.g., text V, which tells the story of Erik Arne Jessen whose childhood is in many ways reminiscent of the circumstances and events of the parental home described in the author's autobiography. Throughout the novel, a considerable number of female characters adopt the particular vocabulary of the author's mother, as described in *Selvbiografi*. (e.g., "fruen går med i huset", "at kludre med sit liv", Hultberg 1998:12, 179). For further examples of autobiographical references in Hultberg's writings, see particularly Steffen Nielsen 2010:22–24.

Novel (1937–38), respectively. However, they do not focus on the authors quoted several times by Benjamin and Bakhtin: those who played a vital role in transplanting the oral style to written literature, namely Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Leskov. As Boris Eichenbaum notes in his essay *The Structure of Gogol's "The Overcoat"* from 1919, "the basis of the Gogolian text is the first-person narrative and that his text is composed of the presentation of live speech and verbalised emotion" (Eichenbaum 1963:380). According to Bakhtin, the 'Gogolian text' served as an ideal for a great number of prose writers in 19th century Russia. The frequent shifts between a third person narration and the characters' monologues either in free indirect speech or in indirect speech¹⁰ in *The Town and the World* evoke the skaz-technique that Eichenbaum observed on Gogol's prose, as did Bakhtin and Benjamin on his followers Dostoevsky and Leskov.¹¹ Since Hultberg mentions in his autobiography that the reason why he chose to study Slavic philology at the university originates in his teenage experiences with nineteenth-century Russian prose fiction, we can assume that he had a close intellectual relationship to the major authors of this period.¹²

Speaking of Bakhtin, it is important to note that almost every scholarly paper refers to *The Town and the World* as a polyphonic novel,¹³ although only insofar as the reader has to deal with a plethora of different voices (that of the inhabitants, the community, or an unnamed narrator)¹⁴. Nevertheless, what Bakhtin considered to be genuine in Dostoevsky's prose is not solely the presence of several voices or narrative threads, but the coexistence of subjective truths and an ideological pluralism that emerges necessarily as a product of this technique. While authors such as Tolstoy or Turgenev deployed predominantly *monologic* strategies, through the *dialogic* nature of Dostoevsky's prose the reader is not confronted with a ready-made religious, moral or ideological lesson. Instead, we have no other choice than to cope with the simultaneity of the divergent worldviews

¹⁰ An example of an abrupt shift to indirect speech from chapter II: "Det var en fugtig lejlighed, men det må man jo tage med, *vi har ikke lov til at klage* skønt der løb tuberkulose i familien, og de bibeholdt" (my emphasis, Hultberg 1998:7). Another example of free indirect speech from chapter XL: "De opkaldte tvillingerne efter Odins to ravne, [...] men *dér havde stiftprovsten nu alligevel sagt stop, ikke fordi det ikke var navne, og dertil gode nordiske, men kristne kunne man altså ikke kalde dem.*" (emphasis added, Hultberg 1998:88).

¹¹ For a short technical (i.e. not generic) use of the *skaz*-tradition in *The Town and the World*, see Dalager and Vanghøj 2000:14–15.

¹² "Det var et utal af forfattere og det er umuligt for mig nu at holde styr på hvem det var i enkelthed, men de der kom til at gøre størst indtryk på mig generelt var uden tvivl russerne. Jeg fik læst alle Turgenjevs romaner der var oversat, og jeg fik også læst det meste af Dostojevskij. [...] Dostojevskij var så meget vigtigere for mig end Tolstoj. Og han var jo også grunden til at jeg begyndte at studere slavisk filologi, gik til aftalemødet på universitetet hvor man tilrettelagde undervisningen i slavisk filologi, og det blev en meget afgørende eftermiddag for mig." (Hultberg 2009). The careful philologist might also come across another literal allusion to Dostoevsky in the German edition of Hultberg's third novel (in many respects his formal breakthrough) *Requiem* (1985), where the author cites Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* just before the epilogue, the very last segment, which develops a theme of redemption, similarly to the finale of *The Town and the World*.

¹³ See e.g. Ping Huang 1999, Ping Huang 2000, Berzelius Steglich 2009, Dalager and Vanghøj 2000, Cymbrikiewicz 2019.

¹⁴ For a careful analysis of the narrator's voice, see Dalager and Vanghøj 2000:5–11, Thurah 2002:155–158, Greve 2006:120–121.

(Bakhtin 1984, 6–7, 101–102, 271),¹⁵ which is also a common feature of Hultberg's novel. Yet on the technical level, this dialogism is not implemented via real dialogues, but through fragmentary utterances, equally weighted due to the novel's unique compositional principle.

Interestingly, Hultberg was attracted to the polyphonic technique while he also maintained a desire to draw on biographical genres (the latter being considered as a *monologic* form by Bakhtin);¹⁶ his short stories from the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the 1989 novel *Prælude* bear clear witness to it. If we have in mind that Hultberg points at Turgenev as another example of Slavic literary influence during the formative years in secondary school, we might assume that he at least partially learnt the craft of the biographical sketch in the workshop of the Russian master. It is instructive to compare the extremely condensed story of the handsome Aage Briggs (XX) with the equally compact biography of Pavel Petrovitch Kirsanov from *Fathers and Children* (or *Fathers and Sons*, 1862) at the beginning of chapter VII. Although the roles of the characters are creatively altered, the structural elements, the general mode of narration, the motifs and the dramatic movements have much in common. Both characters are young, handsome men when the story begins and they climb steeply up the social ladder until a certain event. In the case of Pavel Petrovitch, it is a fateful unrequited love to Princess R., a young noblewoman with an "enigmatical glance", that is the cause of his downfall. Yet before the end of the short biography, on her deathbed Princess R. returns the ring that Pavel Petrovich gave her once. On the stone, originally carved in the figure of a sphinx, she drew lines in the shape of a cross and enclosed also a message: through the cross the "enigma became solved" (Turgenev 1921:41). Just as Turgenev's hero, Aage Briggs is an idol of women, first assistant professor, later lecturer in English, and remains a bachelor and withers away due to unknown circumstances as a relatively young man. His only refuge is the regular trips to England. However, the narrator, a mouthpiece for the inhabitants of the town, alludes to a homosexual relationship with an English-speaking gentleman who once visits the town at Briggs's invitation. And when the protagonist dies, he has a peaceful smile on his face. The similarities are obvious, but while reconciliation after a woeful love affair is encapsulated in a regular religious symbol in *Fathers and Children*, the fateful love story of Hultberg's fictive universe takes the form of a camouflaged double life. Here the motif of redemption first becomes apparent after the protagonist's death, when he is freed from the fear of social humiliation.

In his autobiography, when recounting the Slavic masters that made a deep impression on him, Hultberg avoids mentioning Jan Amos Komenský (more commonly known as Johannes Amos Comenius, 1592–1670)¹⁷ and his satirical-allegorical novel, *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* (1623).

¹⁵ It is only van der Liet (1999) and Ping Huang (1999) who use the term correctly, as Thomson (2003:197) also observes it.

¹⁶ On biography as a genre proper and *The Town and the World* see Cymbrikiewicz 2019:139–148.

¹⁷ While Hultberg was generally acknowledged as an expert of Polish literature due to his dissertation on Waclaw Berent and his translations of works by Witold Gombrowicz and Frédéric Chopin, it is a lesser-known fact that his first major at university was Czech language and literature (Hultberg 2005:276).

However, he makes passing reference to Komenský in relation to the genesis of *The Town and the World* in the essay *Bogstavelig talt* (Hultberg 2005:276). A comprehensive investigation of the potential links between the two works would go far beyond the scope of this short study; for now it suffices to draw attention to the common features, e.g., the use of key spatial concepts, the employment of encapsulated allegorical reading strategies, the symbolical richness, and the overtly poetic vocabulary.¹⁸

As discussed above, the term *monologic* in the Bakhtinian sense refers to a compositional attribute of certain prose genres, such as the biographical or the historical novel. On the other hand, monologue might also denote a technique of unmediated speech, a form that is used extensively in modernist prose fiction. In his introduction to so-called "monologists" ("enetalere") in the fifth volume of *Dansk litteraturs historie*, Martin Zerlang (2009, 500–512) sees Peer Hultberg's prose as an example of postmodern monomaniac monologism and refers to his Austrian contemporary Thomas Bernhard (1931–1989) as the perhaps most internationally acclaimed author, often associated with different forms of monologism. If we take a brief look at Bernhard's writings, it can hardly escape our attention that the collection entitled *Der Stimmenimitator* (1978; *The Voice Imitator*, 1997) shares a striking number of common features with *The Town and the World*. Although *Der Stimmenimitator* does not present itself as a novel, it is a composite text in which the 104 *Kürzestgeschichten* about fictive and real personalities are embedded in a deeper matrix of connections.¹⁹ Just as in *The Town and the World*, these stories revolve, with few exceptions, around themes such as suicide, violent death, personal debacle, and mass catastrophes. The absurd, tragic or even tragicomic events are mediated via an impassible, extradiegetic narrator, a faceless community indicated by the plural first person pronoun, or by quoting a newspaper in reported speech.

Linguistically, both texts operate with extensive hypotactic structures²⁰, syntactic digressions, and "monstrous" and unusual compound nouns.²¹ The last seven biographical anecdotes (beginning with *In Rom*, Bernhard 1998:146–155) that deal with the fate of unsatisfied artists share a number of similarities with for instance stories II (on the apostate communist Henning Bæk) and XV (on the ill-fated professor of English Niels Asmus Larsen), and the motif of travel and edification connects them with, for instance, the stories *In Rom*—a homage to the Austrian poet and author Ingeborg Bachmann, as Holdenried (2018:152) and Mittermayer (1995:100) observes—and *Zurückgekehrt*.

Taking a deeper look at two significant texts reveals that both *Der Stimmenimitator* and *The Town and the World* dedicate a single text to the theme of selfless love, in contrast to the prevailing focus on moral and ethic

¹⁸ Ping Huang (2000:80) reminds us of the link between Hultberg and Comenius, but she mentions only the metaphor of the labyrinth, as a clue to the poetic puzzle of Hultberg's text universe.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Mittermayer 1995:99–100.

²⁰ See the second sentence in the chapter entitled *Angst* (Bernhard 1996:17) and the very first sentence in narrative I (Hultberg 1998:5).

²¹ See Holdenried 2018:154. Examples include "Höhlenforscherrettungsmannschaft" (Bernhard 1996:22), "konfirmationsspadseredragt" (Hultberg 1998:177), or "arbejdsmandsretsstilling" (Hultberg 1998:87).

shortcomings in other narratives. The story *Im Frauengraben* concerns a male company who engage in conversation with an unknown farmer in an inn. The foreigner does not conceal the purpose of his visit: he is looking for a wife in the neighbourhood. The members of the group intend to ridicule him and send him to a place called Frauengraben, a mock name for the home of a woman in her fifties, paralysed from the neck down. Surprisingly, the farmer falls in love, he marries the woman and the story ends on the following note: "they are said to be happy" (Bernhard 1997:50). In the very last story of *The Town and the World*, Povl Hestlund falls in love with the disabled Anna and marries her. In the final visionary scene, the widowed Povl imagines Anna—whose name in Hebrew means "grace", as Lærkesen (1993:24) reminds us—rising from her wheelchair to the words of Jesus and embraces his husband in heaven.

Upon reading these passages, the audience may experience a sense of perplexity regarding the apparently positive outcome of a relationship, in which the physical impairments are surmounted by emotional nobility, a quality uncommon for the majority of the characters in the narratives. Of course, neither Bernhard's nor Hultberg's writing are naïve Christian allegories, even though they do not deny explicitly to depict human virtues and positive emotions unironically.²² The earthly cosmos that they visualise is rather like a panopticon of human endeavours where every attempt is doomed to only cause suffering. Here, love does not eliminate suffering, as neither the paralysed woman's nor Anna's condition change due to a happy marriage. Misery is an inherent aspect of human existence, and it is arguably the most significant element thereof. The concept of redemption is primarily depicted in a reported account ("they are said to be happy") or in the fantasies of a character ("[Povl] glædede sig ved tanken om at han hos Herren skulle møde sin værkbrudne Anna", Hultberg 1998:299). However, redemption is conspicuously absent from the fictional reality depicted within these texts, and the generally ironical tone of the novel can exert an infectious effect on how we interpret them.

A further issue arises when seeking to establish logical consistency between the narratives as regards the assessment of physical disability. Text LXXXVI is a parody of a regular fairy tale on social upliftment of a married couple who experience "genuine joy" ("deres glæde var ægte", Hultberg 1998:238) in everyday life. However, at the end of the narrative, the couple gets into a car accident while on holiday in Germany and the narrator concludes: "fortunately for them, both Mr and Mrs Magasin-Nielsen died on the spot, otherwise they would both have ended up in wheelchairs" ("heldigvis, for dem selv, var både herr og fru Magasin-Nielsen død på stedet, ellers ville de vel begge være endt i rullestol." Hultberg 1998:241). The implications of this utterance is that being bound to a wheelchair combined with a happy marriage is even worse than death itself. This makes the optimistic reading of the last story of the novel rather questionable. Ultimately, it is up to the readers to determine whether these

²² For further narratives that can be interpreted as having a positive denouement in *The Town and the World*, see the paragraph on the seven virtues below.

episodes prevail in terms of quality, style, or logic over the generally pessimistic worldview of the other narratives.²³

Scholarship and Hultberg himself have often emphasised the significance of biblical²⁴ and mythological²⁵ inspiration behind the texts of *The Town and the World*. Many have attempted to connect specific figures and tales from Greek, Jewish, and Christian mythology with the characters of the novel; yet no scholar goes beyond the recognition of some commonly known themes. When it comes to autoanalysis,²⁶ Hultberg highlights how creatively the stories recycle elements from Western culture and showcase the strategies, in Genettean terms, of diegetic (e.g., gender inversion) or pragmatic transposition (e.g., change of tools).²⁷ Besides the means of imitation there is another gap in research history that may be worthy of further investigation, namely, the different subgenres of literary biography. As noted above, most of the narratives in the novel are shaped like biographies that begin with the central characters' public ministry and end with their death. From the standpoint of historical genre theory²⁸ and structural analysis, this gesture can be categorised as a secular generic reactivation of hagiographic literature. By generic reactivation Genette (1997:210–212) means the phenomenon when a forgotten (often premodern) genre gets a new design with a palpable reference to the ancestors. Traditional components of saints' lives appear in many stories of *The Town and the World*: martyrdom (LXVII, XXXV), virtues (XC, XCI, XCIII, XCIV, XCVII–C), miracles and miraculous lives of holy people (LXII). As Hultberg also mentions in the foreword to his prose collection *Kronologi*, the last fifteen chapters of *The Town and the World* have a quasi edifying function and were inspired by Giotto's frescos in Capella degli Scrovegni in Padua. The bottom tiers of the church's inner side walls, painted in so-called *grisaille* technique, demonstrate the seven deadly sins and the seven virtues in the Aquinian sense, which Hultberg transforms into negative and positive biographies in the narratives. According to the author, the two final chapters deal with the

²³ For different readings of narrative C with a pessimistic interpretation, see Dalager and Vanghøj 2000:25–26, Lærkesen 1993:23–24. Similarly, Mittermayer (1995, 100) calls *Im Frauengraben* an *Anti-Märchen* and reads it as an absurd travesty of the German *Märchen* tradition. Both stories may also be interpreted as modern reenactments of ancient love narratives and medieval romances, in which social obstacles are overcome by means of the transcendent power of true sentiment. However, in these cases, the hindrance is not class difference, familial conflict or another conventional social barrier. The revitalisation of the genre thus carries a certain ironical twist, due to the female character's physical or mental impairment. For a more detailed analysis of the correspondences between Hultberg's and Bernhard's oeuvres (with a special focus on the autobiographies), see Csúr 2025.

²⁴ See, e.g., Dalager and Vanghøj 2000:14–17.

²⁵ See, e.g., Thurah 2000:165–171.

²⁶ See especially Hultberg 1995:14–15.

²⁷ On different types of transposition see Genette 1997:passim.

²⁸ For an overview of diachronic approaches to genre theory, see Zymner 2010:131–158.

virtue of love (*caritas*)²⁹ in two different ways (love as fraternal virtue and generosity versus love as romantic affection between two human individuals).³⁰

The significance of the anecdotal tradition has already been mentioned by several scholars, though without further precision.³¹ According to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, an anecdote is "a short and pointed narrative, often of a biographical nature" (Goldhill 2018), a description that applies well to most modern anecdotes and also to most of the texts in *The Town and the World*. However, there is a second usage of the term, which is not so commonly known outside the circles of classical scholars. The Greek word *anekdotos* (an extremely rare term in ancient literature) originally meant "unpublished" and was used, alongside more common expressions, to designate delicate stories offering insight into the private lives of the social elite, often through informant narrators with close ties to the court milieu. The best-known example is Procopius' *Secret History*—also known as *Anecdota*—a collection of stories detailing the excessive lifestyle and immoral behaviour of the Byzantine imperial couple Justinian and Theodora in the sixth century AD.

This genre has been revived on several occasions by modern authors. Mme de Sévigné's correspondance with her daughter on court life under Louis XIV, and—on Danish soil—Charlotte Dorothea Biehl's *Historiske Breve* (written 1784–85) about Frederick V, are notable examples. The narratives of *The Town and the World* resemble this specific anecdotal tradition in at least two respects. First, the portrayal of the hidden life of the social elite appears to be one of the primary ambitions of the unnamed narrator(s) of the novel. The majority of the texts concern either protagonists from the upper middle class or characters from the lower classes who aspire to ascend the social hierarchy and regard a bourgeois lifestyle and standard of living as a desirable goal.³² Second, the narrator assumes the role of an informant who presents himself as a transmitter and guarantor of the truthness of urban gossip, employing reported speech without further comment on its veracity. Text LXXXI is composed almost entirely of a verbatim transcription of the words of the main character Harald Jensen's mother, who voices her concerns about two successive daughters-in-law. The main part of her monologue consists almost exclusively of private remarks on the second wife: "of course, no one would directly claim that she was the whore of Babylon, but one still wonders what kind of woman would get involved with a divorced man".³³

²⁹ Which might be a reference to a scene in the first volume (*Swann's Way*) *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust where M. Swann tells the narrator that the pregnant kitchen-maid resembles Giotto's Caritas figure from the walls of Capella degli Scrovegni whose portrayal later appears in the narrator's schoolroom in Combray and is together with the other representations of sins and virtues a formative visual experience in the development of the protagonist. Thurah (2002:165) gives a detailed analysis of the possible connections between the characters on the frescoes and those in the novel.

³⁰ "medmenneskelig ædelsind og gavmildhed og som kærligheden mellem to mennesker" (Hultberg 1995:15).

³¹ See Thurah 2002:160–162, Schou 2003, Berzelius Steglich 2009:8, Zerlang 2009:505, Cymbrykiewicz 2019:141, Ping Huang 2000:85.

³² On bourgeois culture as the social elite see Cymbrykiewicz 2019:142–144.

³³ "naturligvis var der ingen der direkte ville påstå at hun var den babyloniske skøge, men man spørger jo alligevel sig selv hvad det er for en kvinde der giver sig i lag med en fraskilt mand" (Hultberg 1993:222).

Moreover, as the mother suggests, she may be conspicuously present when the local soldiers have night leave, and when things are done "on the sly".³⁴ By allowing an internal informant narrator to depict Lone as a promiscuous evil-doer and similarly claiming "how beautiful Harald's and Lone's marriage was",³⁵ both thematically and through the narratorial position, the content and form of, for instance, empress Theodora's portrayal in chapter 9 of *The Secret History*—"she would throw off her clothes and exhibit naked to all and sundry those regions, both in front and behind, which the rules of decency require to be kept veiled and hidden from masculine eyes" (Procopius 1966:83)—are evocatively brought to life. Similarly, narrative XCV focuses on immoral sexuality and provides insight into the extramarital escapades of Lorenz Bendixen and Jette Lurup, who are observed by a grocer as they are "chasing each other stark naked through the whole house",³⁶ and who keep "all kinds of filthy things"³⁷ in their cupboards. *Anecdote*, therefore, proves apt not only in its modern definition but also in its ancient one: the narratives in *The Town and the World* operate as pointed biographical vignettes while at the same time exposing scandalous, delicate, and morally ambiguous conduct among the upper classes.

Danish scholarship often employs anecdote as a genre term in combination with the qualifying noun, *skæbne*- ("fate" or "destiny").³⁸ This compound was introduced by Karen Blixen (1885–1962) through her final collection of short stories, *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958; in Danish: *Skæbne-Anekdoter*, 1958).³⁹ If we compare the structure, themes, and transtextual field of Blixen's text universe, a clear connection emerges between the stories of *The Town and the World* and, for instance, *Babette's Feast*, a well-known and exemplary story from *Anecdotes of Destiny*. Blixen's tale recounts the fate of an ingenious French cook who flees the Paris Commune of 1871. She settles in a small Norwegian town, where she becomes a servant in the household of two elderly sisters belonging to a pietist congregation founded decades earlier by their late father. When Babette unexpectedly wins the lottery, she chooses not to leave the community to live in freedom but instead spends her entire fortune on a luxurious feast in order to make

³⁴ "hvad der går i svang" (Hultberg 1998:222).

³⁵ "hvor smukt hans og Lones ægteskab var" (Hultberg 1993:222).

³⁶ "splitternøgne, gennem hele huset" (Hultberg 1998:270).

³⁷ "alle mulige slags griserier" (Hultberg 1998:270).

³⁸ *Skæbnefortælling* (literally "fate story") is also a widely used term in literary criticism in Denmark without a consensus definition. Typically, this term is applied to realist prose fiction that has a clear biographical theme.

³⁹ Heitmann (2020:276–281) provides a detailed analysis of the various anecdotal hypotexts underlying Blixen's *Anecdotes of Destiny*, ranging from Procopius to Gerhard Neumann's assessment of Blixen's reworking of the short-story genre as opposed to the formal conventions established by nineteenth-century German authors such as Heinrich von Kleist and E. T. A. Hoffmann. According to Neumann (2010), Blixen modernised the German *Novelle* by refusing to allow the central, catalysing event ("unerhörtes Ereignis") to be reconciled with a meaningful, teleological world order—as is characteristic of Hoffmann's and Kleist's narratives. Instead, the anecdotal technique serves to reinforce the impossibility of bridging the abyss between the experience of reality and any harmonious system. An exploration of how Hultberg further develops this particular *novum* will be undertaken in my forthcoming article, *Uncertain Closure and Modal Ambiguity in Karen Blixen's Babette's Feast and Peer Hultberg's Byen og Verden*.

the members of the congregation "perfectly happy" (Blixen/Dinesen 2019). The tale concludes with Philippa, one of the sisters' words: "ah, how you will enchant the angels!" (Blixen/Dinesen 2019). Despite the generally positive and optimistic ending of the tale, Hultberg argues in an essay from 1990 that *Babette's Feast* exemplifies how Blixen "emphasises the negative and obstructive aspect of the effect of the surroundings" and the "destructive aspects of the self within a human system".⁴⁰ This may help explain why Hultberg devotes ninety-nine anecdotes of destiny to moral and social failure and only a single, final narrative to redemption. Another point of connection between Blixen and Hultberg lies in Blixen's earlier collection *Last Tales* (1957), which contains seven chapters originally conceived as part of an unfinished novel, *Kapitler af Romanen Albondocani*, envisioned as a non-linear network of one hundred tales. However, this project was never completed.⁴¹ The almost inextricable matrix of connections between the minor and major elements of Hultberg's storyworld—a concept that Kjærstad 1993 aptly associates with *The Town and the World*—may likewise recall Blixen's demiurgic narrators.⁴²

In the following section, I shall outline the framework of a theoretical approach that focuses on the possible connections between the novel in question and a specific generic forerunner—the so-called composite novel. My aim here is to demonstrate in detail that the individual stories of *The Town and the World*, the relations between them, and the novel as a compound entity exhibit a degree of internal and external structural complexity, as well as transtextual density, that scholarship so far only partially addressed. Put differently, while in my previous analyses I have cracked a number of eggs, the present approach turns to the close examination of a single one.

4 The Bird or the Egg: A Novel of Novels—or the Other Way Around?

Although experiments with the novel as a generic form was a recurring gesture throughout Hultberg's writing career, he was especially preoccupied with the genre in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the preface to the anthology *Kronologi* (1995), which contains prose works written between 1964 and 1995, he reveals that when he and several other authors were approached by the magazine *Passage* to write a novel of no more than five typewriter pages, he developed a new formal principle in his writing. The short fictionalised biographical stories *En Kunstnerskæbne* (An Artist's Fate), *Tobiasdage* (Tobias' Days) and *Cire perdue*—loosely based on the lives of Alfred Wäspi (Hultberg's husband), the Russian-born psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salomé, and Marcel Proust, respectively—as well as, more importantly, the two final anecdotal texts *Den nye Dags Spejl* (The Mirror of the New Day) and *Nomen est omen*, are very closely related to the formal structure found in *The Town and the World*. In fact, if we merge the individual traits of these short texts, the result will be a formula that captures the distinctive

⁴⁰ "I Babettes Gæstebud synes Karen Blixen sluttelig at betone det negative hæmmende aspekt af omgivelsernes indvirkning på kunstneren", "undertrykkeren er medmennesket eller et menneskeligt system der repræsenterer selvets destruktive aspekter" (Hultberg 2005:259, 260).

⁴¹ For the latest treatment of this subject, see Sørensen 2022.

⁴² For specific literal and thematic allusions to *Babette's Feast*, see my forthcoming article referred to in footnote 39.

generic pattern of the hundred stories of Hultberg's award winning novel. This idiosyncratic form encompasses mythological themes, biblical motifs, Proustian references, the biographical mode, elements of the oral tradition, visual inspiration, proverbial heritage, an inclination to interpret the characters' psychological motivations through childhood experiences, and, finally, a drive to create extremely condensed novels "in an objectively brief, almost saga-like narrative style"⁴³.

A full discussion of whether the hundred texts can individually be classified as novels lies beyond the scope of the present study. In my view, however, the narratives written according to this method of self-imposed formal constraints are comparable to those of *The Town and the World*, and the author presumably regarded them as novels in this restrictive sense.⁴⁴ The analytical problem I shall address here is whether the texts that make up the novel are independent entities or interdependent components whose productive coexistence gives rise to a higher-order form.⁴⁵ Put more simply, the challenge that we are confronted with here is whether and how *The Town and the World* can be interpreted as a so-called composite novel. The methodological framework is therefore based on *The Composite Novel* by Dunn and Morris (1995), whose approach covers a wide range of different short story collections from different periods and linguistic traditions within Western literary history. Furthermore, their focus on genre identification—rather than on spatial, narratological, or biographical analysis—makes their model particularly suitable for the present inquiry, even though these alternative approaches could also serve as fully legitimate analytical tools.

In their seminal study, *The Composite Novel. The Short Story Cycle in Transition* Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris argue that there is a terminological gap between the "novel proper" and the "mere collection" of short stories. In their view, this genre—what they term the *composite novel*—has existed for nearly two centuries without a stable generic designation.⁴⁶ They therefore propose the introduction of a new term and offer the following definition: "the composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (Dunn and Morris 1995:2). Following a theoretical and historical introduction, the monograph is structured around these "organizing principles", which serve as the basis for detailed analyses of hundreds of American, British, and continental works that conform to the definition cited above. Viewed through the lens of this classification, two such principles appear particularly relevant to *The Town and the World*. In the following paragraphs, I focus on one of them, as the second—patterns and palimpsests, i.e. thematic

⁴³ "en nøgtern knap, næsten saga-agtig fortællestil" (Hultberg 1995:13).

⁴⁴ As Thurah (2002:153), Pelle (1993:32), and Thomson (2003:213) also agree, albeit with reference to different subgenres.

⁴⁵ On the fragmentary nature of the novel, see Berni 2004 and Berzelius Steglich 2009. However, neither addresses the question of unity. It is worth recalling that Hultberg himself referred to *The Town and the World* as a so-called *kollektivroman* (2005:277), a term widely used in Danish literary criticism to denote a novel that focuses on a group of people rather than on a single protagonist (Schack 2009).

⁴⁶ More accurately, the term has been used in reference to collaborative works, i.e. novels written by a number of authors.

similarities and mythic allusions—has already been addressed in earlier scholarship.

The first organising principle in *The Composite Novel* focuses on the importance of place. In this chapter, Dunn and Morris analyse exemplary novels and their settings against the backdrop of the so-called "referential field", a term introduced by Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading* (1976), "upon which one can register meaning and establish connections during the act of reading (or rereading) the text" (Dunn and Morris 1993:31).⁴⁷ The setting in the composite novel "may be highly complex and multivalent" and thus "offers numerous possibilities as an element of interconnection" (30). The gradual development from the so-called village sketch (e.g. Russell Mitford's *Our Village* from 1824) to the city as a referential field (e.g. James Joyce's *Dubliners* from 1914) reflects a broader literary tendency, closely linked to socio-historical changes. In *Dubliners*, all stories are set in the Irish capital, yet this not alone does suffice to classify the book as a composite novel. As Dunn and Morris note, Joyce "refused to omit any stories or to change the sequence" (39) during the prepublication process. This suggests that the arrangement was fully intentional: the fifteen narratives represent four sequential groupings to reflect different age groups, and, at the same time, a progression from naïveté to self-awareness runs like a red thread throughout the novel. Comparable signs of authorial design can be observed in *The Town and the World*: Povl Hestlund's fragmented biography (I, LI, C), the arrangement of the last fifteen texts, the recurrence of biblical and mythological motifs all point to a carefully orchestrated structure. Yet, as in Joyce's case, it is above all place that constitutes the strongest bond—not only between the characters, but also between the narratives themselves. Even when figures are neither relatives nor otherwise directly connected, they share a tragic human condition imposed on them by living in the city. It is as the "aura of paralysis" (Dunn and Morris 1993:40) permeates every inhabitant, allowing no possibility of escape.

The city symbolically represents the greater world (as the title also allows us to think), and the novel presents itself as a postmodern pastiche of satirical-allegorical prose works from the Western literary canon that have a clear and pessimistic moral message. In Hultberg's dark universe, Viborg does not "embody the failed glory" (Dunn and Morris 1993, 43) of a nation or a country, as Dublin and Ireland do in Joyce's novel, but it is an atemporal and natural habitat of mankind, an inalienable concomitant of human existence, the *cosmos* itself.⁴⁸ Just as any coherent collection of myths belongs to a geographical area that can be replaceable by any other place, the unity of narratives in *The Town and the World* is not dependent on a specific setting, even though the title plays on this interpretative option. I suggest that the fictionalised Viborg as a place is an "organizing principle" on our first level of understanding, but if we take a deeper look at the composition, we can easily conclude that the function of the place is to hold the heterogeneous stories together. On the other hand, the unity of

⁴⁷ For other applications of methods based on the importance of place see van der Liet 1999 and Thomson 2003:152–234.

⁴⁸ As it has been suggested by Thurah 2002:170, Greve 2006:121, Schou 2003:passim, Thomson 2003:passim.

the novel depends on its elements, making the question of dependency ultimately undecidable. Just as the focus is not on the solution in the Plutarchian causality dilemma, but on a metaphorical representation of insoluble philosophical enigmas, it is the compositional codependency between narrative place and its stories that *The Town and the World* showcases in a radically self-reflective fashion. If we take a step further and attempt to understand the complete oeuvre as a nested system of boxes,⁴⁹ the novel will fit into an even greater tableau of the author's literary production: Hultberg's experiments with the novel begin in the 1960s with a creative imitation of the *nouveau roman* and ends with a genuine and unrepeatable artefact.⁵⁰

In the present study, I have attempted to explore some of those genre allusions and model texts behind Peer Hultberg's novel *The Town and the World* that have not been investigated so far, and I have proposed an approach to the unity of the hundred narratives using a genre definition not previously applied in scholarship. As mentioned in the introduction, further study of the issues raised in the first section may be the subject of future research. More than thirty years have passed since the novel was first published and this means that its function and position have also changed in the imaginary flowchart of literary history. Here I can only refer to the fact that Hultberg's novel has also established itself as a hypotext in the last three decades, and has had a demonstrable or indirect influence on specific works or the oeuvres of authors such as Carsten Müller Nielsen⁵¹ or Péter Esterházy.⁵² The next logical step is, hopefully, a thorough examination of the afterlife of this multi-faceted masterpiece.

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⁴⁹ Which is easily justifiable as the author refers to his own writing career as one continuous Bildungsroman (Hultberg 1995:15).

⁵⁰ For another reading of the connections between *Dubliners* and *The Town and the World*, see Greve 2006:passim.

⁵¹ As Skyum-Nielsen (2013) also observes.

⁵² <https://www.danskeakademi.dk/priser/den-store-pris/2004/>. Retrieved 12 Aug. 2024.

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