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# Nordic National Borderlands in Selma Lagerlöf

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## Approaching the nation as intermediate space

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a reorientation in Scandinavian literature and culture towards the foregrounding of national issues. This cultural turn is particularly evident in the work of Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940). In a recent discussion Vivi Edström suggests that, if Sweden has a national epic, it is probably Lagerlöf's first book *Gösta Berlings saga*, published in 1891, and quotes the contemporary critic Oscar Levertin's claim that this text is 'det mest svenska, som någonsin diktats' (Edström 2001:61) (the most Swedish that was ever written). The spatial focus of *Gösta Berlings saga* is, however, strictly limited to the local universe of Värmland, the rural western district of Sweden in which Lagerlöf grew up. In comparison, Lagerlöf's two main works from the first decade of the twentieth century, *Jerusalem* (1901–02) and *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey Through Sweden, 1906–07), foreground a dialectic between local, national and international. At a time when the deterioration and eventual dissolution of the union relationship between Sweden and Norway accentuated the question of national belonging in both countries, these texts contributed in different ways to the focalisation and negotiation of the Swedish nation space.

In *Jerusalem*, a novel on emigration, a transition from a local to a national understanding of place and home is begun from the foreign perspective that dominates the novel's second volume, *I det heliga landet* (In the Holy Land). In this, both the religious 'colony' which a group of Swedish emigrants join and develop in Jerusalem and the longed-for landscape of their native rural parish in the central Swedish district of Dalarna<sup>1</sup> are gradually imbued with national symbolism. In the adventure novel and travelogue *Nils Holgersson*, a work commissioned as a textbook for use in Swedish schools, the national orientation that is suggested symbolically in *Jerusalem* as a possible position between the dominant poles of local and foreign is made manifest. The dimensions of the textbook's setting and its main concerns in constructing place are entirely governed by what Franco Moretti terms 'the typically

*intermediate space of the nation-state*' (Moretti 1998:22). *Nils Holgersson* depicts a young peasant boy, its eponymous hero, from Sweden's southern-most district of Skåne (Scania) discovering his native land from, primarily, the air, as the travelling companion of a flock of wild geese migrating the length of the nation towards their breeding grounds in furthest Lapland. The ingenious means through which a national focus is constructed in the text is thus the alignment of the protagonist's perspective to a literal and mobile bird's-eye-view which shrinks the nation space into perceivable dimensions and binds its different districts together as stages of equal significance on an overriding national trajectory. Just as the text creates contacts, exchanges and cohesion between the regional constituents of the national terrain, thereby negotiating the internal borders of Moretti's intermediate space,<sup>2</sup> it pays particular attention to the nation's external borderland interaction with other domains such as Denmark and the European continent to the south, and Lapland to the north.

Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century the theme of the nation and the challenging question of the status of its borders gradually gain significance in Lagerlöf's work. While these issues are more covert in *Jerusalem*, they move centre stage in *Nils Holgersson*.<sup>3</sup> This prominence will be reflected in the following discussion which shall centre on the peripheries of the nation space by investigating aspects of the representation and interpretation of Nordic national borderlands in a small cluster of thematically related Lagerlöf texts, factual as well as fictional, with *Nils Holgersson* at its core. With one exception, which has been made to widen the perspective to include the Danish-German borderland, the texts originate in the seminal period around the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union.

### **Separation as joining together**

In the months preceding the break-up of the union in October 1905 and Norway's consequent gaining of independence, the prospect of discontinuing an association that had existed since 1814 (before which time Norway had been in a union with Denmark for more than 400 years) was not perceived as desirable in all quarters of contemporary Sweden. Among those who voiced an initial resistance to the severance of the ties of the union were some sections of the country's cultural circles. Thus, in early March 1905 the prominent Swedish publisher Karl Otto Bonnier wrote a letter to Selma Lagerlöf in which he asked her to sign a public statement in the Norwegian question. The message of the petition was that, by displaying generosity, Sweden should strive to keep Norway in the union. Lagerlöf, however, immediately rejected this idea. In a letter of 7 March she presented the following argument to Bonnier:

Tack för Ert bref, men jag vill inte vara med om att underteckna detta upprop därfor att jag inte står på fullt samma ståndpunkt som inbjudarna. Jag är nämligen sedan åratal tillbaka af den åsikten att Norge bör få bli ett eget rike. Att få se det gamla norska kungadömet återupprättadt och bevitna ett helt folks jubel öfver att åter få räknas med bland själfständiga stater har länge varit en af mina drömmar. Likaså tror jag, att nationellt medvetande skulle stärkas härhemma, alla skulle bli glada öfver att befrias från denna pinsamma union och en period af kraftansträngning och lyftning skulle inträda. Och till sist skulle vi verkligen komma att bli riktiga vänner, så som vi känna oss gentemot danskarna. (Lagerlöf 1969:28)

(Thanks for your letter but I won't be party to signing this petition because I don't completely share the views of the instigators. For years I have been of the view that Norway ought to be a country in its own right. It has long been one of my dreams to see the old Norwegian kingdom re-established and to witness the jubilation of a whole nation at once again being numbered among the independent countries. I also believe that national consciousness will be strengthened here in Sweden – everyone will be glad to be free of this painful union, and a period of real effort and inspiration will follow. And, finally, we shall come to be real friends, just as we are with the Danes now.)<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, a few months later the publisher seems to have been won over to the author's line. In late June 1905, Bonnier proposed an alternative proclamation that contains clear echoes of the ideas formulated in Lagerlöf's letter. It was published the following month with 180 signatories, including a considerable proportion of the Swedish cultural elite. After having stated how demeaning it would be for Sweden to attempt to coerce the Norwegian people into remaining in 'en union, som aldrig förmått närra, endast fjärma de båda nationerna' (a union which has never been capable of bringing the two nations closer, only of distancing them from one another), the proclamation concludes in an appeal to the Swedish parliament to decide on

...en sådan afveckling af unionsförhållandet mellan Sverige och Norge, att lugn och grannsämja kunna bli rådande på den skandinaviska halön och därmed möjlighet skapas för Sverige att, med alla sina krafter ändtligen samlade, beträda den väg, hvilken allena kan leda ett litet folk fram till varaktig storhet: den inre utvecklingens väg. (Bonnier 1956: insert between pages 104 and 105)

(...the sort of dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway that will lead to the existence of calm and neighbourly harmony on the Scandinavian peninsula and thereby create the possibility for Sweden, with all her energy finally gathered, to enter on the only road that can lead a small nation to lasting greatness: the road of inner development.)

Thus, the tenets of the argument contained in the published petition are identical to those that inform Lagerlöf's analysis: (a) the expectation of a future *rapprochement* between the nations through the clearer demarcation of boundaries that the dissolution of the union represents (replacing their actual distancing from each other within the confines of their artificial proximity as union partners), and (b) the ambition of offsetting what could be perceived as an external loss for the Swedish nation by internal gain and growth.

### **Bread and border**

At the same time as Selma Lagerlöf expressed her vision of separate countries in close coexistence on the Scandinavian peninsula, she was experiencing a breakthrough in the creation of the novel-cum-textbook that was to become the key literary vehicle for the mapping of the Swedish territory post-1905. *Nils Holgersson* was brought out by Bonniers publishing house in two volumes appearing in November 1906 and December 1907 respectively. By displaying the multifarious resources – natural, cultural, industrial – of the homeland and by carefully delineating its extent and diversity, *Nils Holgersson* became one of the weightiest textual contributions to what Lagerlöf's biographer Elin Wägner has termed the Swedish renewal after the end of the union (Wägner 1954:44). The national focus the work was designed to instil was widely disseminated: within half a year of its first publication, the textbook was reportedly being used in 2000 primary school classes up and down the country (Wägner 1954:51). While soon being incorporated into the Swedish literary canon and retaining its place in the popular consciousness to this day,<sup>5</sup> the nation-oriented *Nils Holgersson* has in addition struck an international chord and been translated into a number of languages. It was a contributing, yet not uncontroversial factor<sup>6</sup> in Lagerlöf being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1909 as the first woman winner.<sup>7</sup>

That the dissolution of the union directly influenced the design of *Nils Holgersson* has since been made probable by an interesting find. In 1959 the literary scholar Erland Lagerroth published in *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* (Bonniers Literary Journal) a hitherto unknown Lagerlöf manuscript entitled 'Brödlimpa' (Loaf of Bread), which he had discovered in the Royal Library in Stockholm. It seems clear that the manuscript was intended as a chapter in *Nils Holgersson* since its full title, written in the author's handwriting, is 'Läsebok. Brödlimpa' (Lagerroth 1959:560) (Textbook. Loaf of Bread). In a recent article Ulla-Britta Lagerroth even argues that the chapter was intended as an overall introduction to the work (Lagerroth 2000:141). What, then, is the content of the manuscript and why was it left out?

The chapter constitutes an allegory of the geological genesis of the

Swedish-Norwegian peninsula and is thus in keeping with a recurring endeavour in *Nils Holgersson* itself to attribute – in addition to embracing the modernity of Swedish society – a ‘deep’ or diachronic temporal dimension to the nation space. The chapter is conspicuous by claiming an almost organic symbiosis between the neighbouring countries. By means of an imagery which, not untypically for Lagerlöf’s texts, is rooted in the sphere of domestic female production, the prehistoric emergence of ‘Norway’ and ‘Sweden’ is perceived as a result of God’s not entirely successful attempt at baking bread:

En annan sak åter var inte alldelens riktig, och det var att den [limpan] hade kommit att jäsa ihop med en annan limpa, som hade legat för nära på plåten. De hade grott samman så fast, att det inte var någon möjlighet att skilja dem utan att förstöra dem både två. (Lagerlöf 1959:557)

(There was something else that wasn’t quite right, too, and that was that it [the loaf] had risen and stuck to another loaf which had lain too close to it on the tray. They had grown together so firmly that there was no possibility of separating them without destroying them.)

Here, it is claimed that the degree of interconnection between the loaves/countries is so high that it is most of all reminiscent of that of conjoined twins: to separate them is to destroy them – a strikingly different view of the relationship between Norway and Sweden than the one Lagerlöf formulated in her letter to Bonnier. The decision not to include the chapter – which, in Erland Lagerroth’s assessment, was written in early 1905 (Lagerroth 1959:561) – into the end product of *Nils Holgersson* can meaningfully, then, be placed in the context of the break-up of the union. This turning point in the history of the Scandinavian territories made it highly inopportune to realise an idea of a transnational continuum in relation to the newly divorced neighbours (cf. also Lagerroth 2000:141).

At a personal level the border between the countries seems likewise to have become a barrier for the author. According to Francis Bull in his article ‘Selma Lagerlöf og Norge’ (Selma Lagerlöf and Norway), the Swedish author – who later in life returned to her native district of Värmland that borders on Norway – seems never to have crossed the frontier to the nearby nation after 1905, thus taking her own idea of territorial divorce quite literally (Bull 1958:59-60).

### The periphery as centre

If Lagerlöf’s contacts with Norwegian soil were minimal, she had a considerably more intimate and dynamic relationship to the Danish terrain. She visited Copenhagen and Zealand on numerous occasions, not least during

her twelve years (1885–97) as a school teacher (1885–95) and writer in the ‘peripheral’ southern Swedish coastal town of Landskrona, only a short ferry journey from the ‘central’ conurbation of the Danish capital.<sup>8</sup> Aspects of the author’s relationship to the Danish nation space are discussed in an autobiographical article she published in 1920, ‘Ett minne från stridsåren’ (A Memory from the Years of Conflict).<sup>9</sup> Here, Lagerlöf centres on another disputed dividing line pertaining to the Scandinavian area, namely the border between Denmark and Germany. The article celebrates the establishment of the current border that was drawn in 1920 following two referenda<sup>10</sup> in the aftermath of the First World War. Between 1864, the year of Denmark’s crucial and symbolically charged defeat by Prussia, and 1920, the border had followed a more northern line, along the stream of Kongeåen in Jutland. In the 1920 article Lagerlöf describes a visit she had made 25 years previously, in 1895, to Askov Folk High School, an institution which had been established in 1865 immediately north of the then new border.<sup>11</sup> Thus Lagerlöf’s article could be seen as connecting two polar positions in the history of the Danish territory, that of its ‘division’ and that of its ‘reunification’. The text may be read as a celebration of the national periphery as the core area for the national struggle and its constructive processes. Its ‘topography’ is characterised by a number of complex tensions and connections: between the fatherland ‘up here’ and the foreign or occupied land ‘down there’, between north and south, country and city and, not least, between core and margin.

The retrospective piece depicts how the author undertakes a journey of discovery into a different Denmark from that of Copenhagen and North Zealand. Initially, Lagerlöf informs the reader that, after a decade in Landskrona, she could consider herself familiar with the high culture and central places of the neighbouring country. She was ignorant, however, of what her friends term the ‘real’ Denmark, which the rural folk high schools are said to represent. When she received an invitation from the principal of Askov to visit his establishment in September 1895, she did not hesitate, therefore, to embark on the expedition. From this point on, the elegantly composed piece is structured as an attempt to solve the *riddle* which the folk high school represents to the newcomer. The core of the riddle is the fact that the remote school radiates an aura of national significance which would normally be expected of a capital and its decision-making institutions. Only towards the end of the text can the true identity of Askov be disclosed:

Efteråt under natten låg jag och tänkte på allt vad jag hade fått höra, och då kom jag äntligen till att förstå.

Detta Askov, sade jag till mig själv, är alls ingen folkhögskola. Det är en fästning.

Det är en fästning, rest här på Danmarks gräns för att understödja dem, som

där nere i det erövrade landet kämpa för danskheten. [...]

Det är härifrån, som de krafter utgå, som bibehåller folket där nere som danskar. Här ger man dem danska hjärtan, danska seder, dansk bildning. Här få de lära sig Danmarks stora minnen, som också äro deras, här ställer man för deras ögon vad Danmark har ljuvast och bäst, så i dikt som i bild.

Danmarks bästa män komma hit för att understödja arbetet, därför att detta är en stridsplats, och den som strider här, han strider för fosterlandet. (Lagerlöf 1945:36)

(Afterwards, during the night, I lay and thought of everything I'd got to hear and then at last I began to understand.

This Askov, I said to myself, isn't a folk high school at all. It's a fortress.

It's a fortress, erected here just inside Denmark in order to give support to the people down there fighting for their Danishness in the conquered land. [...]

This is the place that radiates the forces that keep the people down there Danish. This is where they are given Danish hearts, Danish customs, a Danish education. This is where they get to learn the great annals of Denmark which are also their own. This is where they are shown everything that is loveliest and best about Denmark, both in literature and in art.

Denmark's finest men come here to support the work, because this is a battlefield, and the man who fights here is fighting for his fatherland.)

Thus, the remote folk high school is reinterpreted as a bastion for the protection of the nation and as a powerhouse<sup>12</sup> for the generation of Danish energies, minds and values south of the border.

This understanding of the borderland as a battle zone, and of the national and the foreign as antagonistic, is, however, not Lagerlöf's final say in the matter. Instead, the article concludes with a pronounced equalising of national differences. As Lagerlöf brings her perspective up-to-date, i.e. to 1920, it is striking that she conceives of the new border demarcation not only as a boundary between independent nations but also as instrumental in unifying what she terms the Germanic peoples:

Sådan tedde sig för mig bilden av sønderjydere och danskars gemensamma strävan år 1895, nu tjugufem år efteråt är den förd till seger.

Och allt Norden fröjdar sig [...] över att den orätt, som skilde germanernas stammar, nu är utplånad. Jordlotten, som vällade brödrastriden, är kommen till den rätte arvingen, och den långa, bittra frändfejden kan avlytas. (Lagerlöf 1945:37)

(That is how the picture of the common endeavour of the South Jutlanders and the Danes appeared to me in 1895. Now, twenty-five years later victory has been achieved.

And all of Scandinavia rejoices [...] that the injustice that divided the Germanic peoples has now been eradicated. The plot of land that caused fraternal strife has come to the right heir and the long and bitter family feud can cease.)

In the light of the conclusion of the First World War, these lines can be read as a message of reconciliation to defeated Germany. They express a subtle double-understanding of the reunification as a phenomenon which is played out at both a national (Danish) and a supranational (Germanic) plane. The notion of separate nations that one interpretation of the concept implies is instantly supplemented by another interpretation of unification which suggests the existence of a transnational continuum connecting the Nordic countries and the European continent.

Characteristic, then, for the treatment of the questions of Scandinavian territoriality in the Lagerlöf texts we have investigated so far is (a) a focusing on borderlands rather than on traditional centres, and (b) the employment of double-perspectives that acknowledge new border demarcations as the foundation for the (re-)establishment of independent nation-states while also insisting on the existence and importance of transnational continua. The texts are engaged in both evoking and transcending national boundaries. It must be asked whether similar approaches to nationhood are operative in *Nils Holgersson*, this most nation-focused of Lagerlöf's texts. In so doing we shall turn our attention to a third Scandinavian borderland, namely Skåne, Sweden's southern end which was part of Denmark until 1658,<sup>13</sup> and which constitutes the starting and finishing point of the novel's wonderful journey. We shall consider a couple of intriguing aspects – one early and one late in the novel – of the representation of this region in the text.

### **The writing on the wall**

A passage in the opening chapter of *Nils Holgersson* gives one of those pictorial signals that tend to convey particular meaning in Lagerlöf's texts. It provides, with the protagonist as observer, the following insight into the interior of the cottage which is his family home:

Han lät blickarna vandra från liggsoffan till slagbordet och från slagbordet till spisen. Han såg på grytorna och kaffepannan, som stodo på en hylla bredvid spisen, på vattenspannen vid dörren och på slevar och knivar och gafflar och fat och tallrikar, som syntes genom den halvöppna skåpdörren. Han såg upp till fars bössa, som hängde på väggen bredvid de danska kungligas porträtt, och på pelargonierna och fuksiorna, som blommade i fönstret. (Lagerlöf 1906:13)

([Nils] let his gaze wander from the sofa to the table, from the table to the fireplace. He looked at the kettles, then at the coffee-pot which stood on a shelf near the fireplace; on the water bucket near the door; and on the spoons and knives and forks and saucers and plates, which could be seen through the half-

open cupboard door. He looked at his father's gun, which hung on the wall, beside the portrait of the Danish royal family, and on the geraniums and fuchsias which blossomed in the window.)

Even though the pointing out of the portrait is somewhat counteracted by its position in a subordinate clause and as part of a longer listing, it has an arresting effect within the context of a narrative that has Swedishness as its central concern. Earlier readers also noticed it. Alfred Dalin, chairman of the committee set up by the Swedish Teachers Association to co-ordinate and monitor the development of the textbook, commented sceptically to the author in 1906 when scrutinising her script: 'I en bok för *hela* vårt land?' (Ahlström 1942:58) (In a book for the *whole* of our country?). Lagerlöf, though, was not inclined to remove the reference to the foreign royalty; rather, she highlighted in her reply to Dalin that a careful writing strategy lay behind it: 'Just karakteristiskt för skånska förhållanden. Observandum non est imitandum. Just skrivet med avsikt' (Ahlström 1942:58) (Precisely characteristic of the conditions in Skåne. *Observandum non est imitandum*. Written with intent).

The reply suggests that the reference should be understood in the context of the interplay between regional and national orientation that Lagerlöf had proposed as the textbook's main narrative method to Dalin already in her first outline of the project in November 1901: 'Jag hoppas [...] blifva i stånd att skildra mitt land genom små *lokalisera*de berättelser. [...] Och alla berättelser skola vara infogade för att bilda ett led i det stora hela.' (Lagerlöf 1967:252-53) (I hope [...] to be in a position to depict my country through small *localized stories*. [...] And all the stories will be fitted together to form links in the overall whole). In other words, it was the author's ambition to turn internal differences into a story of the nation. Her reply five years later, when Dalin calls for unity, implies that she remained true to the idea that the narration of the nation must be based on a consideration of regional variations, also in cases where local loyalties may not be regarded as exemplary. The portrait functions, then, as a contribution to signifying the particularities of Skåne as a 'chronotope', to use the critic Mikhial Bakhtín's term (Bakhtín 1996 and 1986). In a region in which the nation's internal and external borders tend to coalesce, these particularities involve Denmark's historical hegemony and the residual allegiances that may stem from this. The quoted passage makes a non-contemporaneous aspect of the country visible and demonstrates Lagerlöf's 'ability to read time in space', as Bakhtín phrases it (Bakhtín 1986:53; see also Moretti 1998:38). And as Moretti observes, it is particularly in the proximity of the border that space becomes time (Moretti 1998:38).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the writing on the wall of Nils Holgersson's home can be connected to conceptualisations elsewhere in Lagerlöf's work of borderlands not (only)

as cut through by a frontier but (also) as continua or as reflections of other places. A particular connection can be made with the text we considered in the previous section: As the author in ‘Ett minne från stridsåren’ looks down into the ‘occupied’ Southern Jutland from her elevated position in the school’s power station (cf. note 12), she interestingly decodes the landscape featured in front of her not as distinctly Danish but as reminiscent of Skåne: ‘Jag tror, att jag hade väntat, att det skulle vara något säreget över landet, men det bredde ut sig under mina spanande ögon [...] likt denna skånska slättbygd, som jag nu sedan många år tillbaka var förtrogen med’ (Lagerlöf 1945:31) (I think I had expected there to be something quite special about the country but it spread out in front of my observant eyes [...] just like the flatlands of Skåne that I had already been familiar with for so many years). Here, by means of what may be read as an example of topographic pan-Scandinavianism, a linkage and a dialogue is established between the two disputed borderlands. In this instance Swedishness (albeit historically disputed) is read into the Danish terrain, thereby reversing the ‘importing’ and ‘exporting’ roles allocated to the countries in *Nils Holgersson*’s opening chapter, but resulting in similar territorial complexities.

In conclusion to this section, then, the effect of the pictorial component featured early in *Nils Holgersson* is to imply overlapping margins or porous borders between countries. The portrait is symbolic of the idea that the nation does not exist by itself alone, but is contingent upon the ‘foreign’ place. ‘Other’ realms do not exist solely beyond the border, but have a presence within the nation itself. A consequence of figuring local characteristics of Skåne in *Nils Holgersson* is therefore the addition of an international dimension to the dialectic between regional and national that Lagerlöf identified as her text’s main method.

### **An insight into the outside**

The mapping of the interior of the hero’s home discussed in the previous section happens just before an elf transforms Nils Holgersson into a carbon copy of himself, a reduction which both represents punishment for the maliciousness that has characterised the protagonist’s behaviour hitherto and creates the physical precondition for his involvement in the ensuing airborne travel adventures. During these, a series of national regions are illuminated by means of the mobile gaze of the hero, and the most prominent role of the protagonist is that of an *eye witness* (cf. the key role attributed to his gaze already in the passage quoted above). As a result of Nils *seeing* Sweden, the country comes into being in the text, and the hero himself is transformed in the process from an obstinate peasant boy into a loyal member of the flying

*flock*, which can be understood as a representation of the *folk*, the people. Just as the protagonist develops into an exemplary citizen, the topography of the text becomes a model for the understanding of the nation – and even, as we shall conclude by demonstrating, for the imagining of the foreign.

When the textbook, deep into its second volume and more than 600 pages after the opening chapter, reintroduces Skåne, a key function is now performed by the gaze not of Nils (who knows the area) but of a new generation of goslings, born during the summer stay in Lapland and since incorporated into the flying formation of the novel's collective of characters. As the text approaches the limits of the space it occupies, it provides an interesting indirect insight into what lies beyond its horizons. This insight is triggered by the thirst for knowledge expressed by the goslings, who (like Nils) could be seen as emblematic of the core target audience of the text: Swedish school children in the younger classes. The text relates that several times since the beginning of the southbound migration the goslings have asked the more experienced members of the flock what the foreign places look like. Though not until the border into Skåne is crossed does the female leading goose, Akka, give the young ones the, perhaps surprising, answer that they should look to the ground to find out, because '[s]å här ser det ut i utlandet' (Lagerlöf 1907:472) ([t]his is what abroad looks like). In order to reinforce this idea of the borderland terrain as a mirror image or model of the foreign, Akka then takes the flock past different segments of the region's landscape: ridge, plain, coast, town – a 'serialising' method of narrating the national territory that is typical of *Nils Holgersson*.<sup>15</sup> In each case the content of Akka's 'teaching' is as the following summing-up of the relation between the Scanian plain and the extensive foreign field: ““Se nu ner! Titta väl efter!” ropade förargåsen. “Så här ser det ut i utlandet ifrån Östersjöns kust ända till de höga bergen, och längre än till dem har vi aldrig farit”” (Lagerlöf 1907:472) ('Look down now! Take a good look!' shouted the leading goose. 'This is what abroad looks like all the way from the Baltic coast to the high mountains, and farther than that we have never travelled'). Even when a variation in size is noticeable (similar to the one articulated by the different stages on the generational series of geese), the notion of underlying or prospective congruity remains constant: ““Så här ser utlandets städer ut, fast de är mycket större,” sade förargåsen. “Men dessa kan väl växa, de som ni”” (Lagerlöf 1907:473) ('This is what towns abroad look like, though they are much bigger,' said the leading goose. 'But these can grow, just like you').

Nearing the completion of its comprehensive survey of Sweden and on the foundation of the national ground that has been textually claimed, the novel thus opens up an international vista. Whereas in the introductory chapter the foreign appeared solely and briefly as a symbolic sign noted in

passing, a whole chapter (LIII) is now devoted to the theme. By using Skåne as a screen upon which the features of central Europe are projected, this third to last chapter figures the borderland as a topographical palimpsest of national and foreign. This figuring communicates the (nationalist) message that the native country can hold its own against any other country: ‘Och pojken kunde inte låta bli att tro, att hon [Akka] den dagen hade rest fram över Skåne för att visa honom, att han hade ett land, som gott kunde mäta sig med vilket som helst ute i världen’ (Lagerlöf 1907:473) (And the boy could not help believing that she [Akka] had travelled over Skåne that day in order to show him that he had a country that could measure up to any other country out in the world). In so doing, however, the topographical palimpsest seems – by a levelling gesture that we can now recognise as a recurring feature in Lagerlöf’s texts – to express the (internationalist) view that home and away are connected and related positions. Underpinning both positions is an insight not dissimilar to Benedict Anderson’s understanding of nations as forming an open series of sovereign systems that are equal in principle and therefore comparable: ‘The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them [...] has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.’ (Anderson 1991:7)

Thus, as the novel draws to its close, it does not bounce against the national border as a barrier or treat the foreign as an empty space or a *terra incognita*. Instead, it prefigures both the encounter with continental Europe that the goslings are about to experience and the internationalisation of subject matter and the large-scale transgression of borders that the core readership of the textbook would be educated about in one of the follow-up volumes to *Nils Holgersson* planned by the Swedish Teachers Association, a volume tellingly entitled ‘Från pol till pol’ (From Pole to Pole) (see Hedin 1911).

In *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* Franco Moretti argues that, as borders in nineteenth-century Europe were both hardening and being challenged as unnatural by nationalist movements, the need for literary representation of the territorial divisions of Europe grew stronger (Moretti 1998:35). We have seen how Selma Lagerlöf in a Scandinavian and somewhat later context rises to a similar literary challenge. The majority of the texts considered above contain representations of or constitute reactions to redrawings of the Scandinavian map in 1864, 1905, 1920, with reflections in one instance of changes in sovereignty occurring as early as 1658 (see note 13). Taken together the texts constitute a debate about Scandinavian borderlands, viewing these not only or primarily as demarcated by a line that separates the familiar from the foreign, but also or rather as liminal and ambiguous places in which nations overlap, interact and connect. Underlying this is a dialogic notion of nationhood and an awareness of the contingent

nature of nation space – a vision, more specifically, of the Scandinavia countries in communication both with each other and with terrains stretching further afield. Or as Ulla-Britta Lagerroth puts it in her consideration of ‘Nordism’ in Lagerlöf’s life and work: : ‘...kanske detta är själva det fundamentala i hennes nordism som i så mycket annat: viljan till överskridande!’ (Lagerroth 2000:146) (perhaps this – the will to transgress boundaries – is itself the fundamental element in her Nordism as it is in so much else).

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[www.bif.se/](http://www.bif.se/) (accessed 30 January 2007).

## Notes

1. In 1897, Lagerlöf moved from Landskrona in southern Sweden (see later in this chapter) to the town of Falun in Dalarna. Vivi Edström suggests a connection between this event and the national ‘turn’ in the author’s work, as the national in Sweden around 1900 was increasingly identified with Dalarna (Edström 2001:62). If, however, this district and its people operate as a synecdoche for the nation in *Jerusalem*, it is not so much in the form of the traditional Dala society, which is torn apart during the course of the novel’s first volume *I Dalerne* (In Dalerna), as in the transposed shape of the new colony abroad and in the imagined landscapes of home.
2. For a closer examination of the ‘internal’ fabric of the nation space in *Nils Holgersson*, see Thorup Thomsen (2004).
3. For further consideration of the relationship between the two novels, see Thorup Thomsen (1998).
4. Translated by Peter Graves. If no other source is indicated in the following, translations of Swedish passages into English are by Peter Graves to whom I am grateful.
5. In a poll which was conducted in the autumn of 1997 by the journal of the Swedish public libraries, *Biblioteket i fokus*, and in which c. 21,000 votes were received, *Nils Holgersson* was placed fifth on a list of Swedish books of the century. See [www.bif.se/](http://www.bif.se/) (accessed 30 January 2007).
6. Vivi Edström documents that a contributing factor in Lagerlöf – in spite of public opinion in favour – not being awarded the prize in 1908, the year of her 50th birthday, was reluctance in a section of the Swedish Academy, the body responsible for the prize, to make an award that, due to the proximity in time to *Nils Holgersson*’s publication, could be perceived as a tribute to this particular work of whose ideology the members of the section were sceptical.
7. Lagerlöf received the award two years after Kipling, whose *Jungle Books*, according to Lagerlöf’s own statements (1969:40), formed a source of inspiration for *Nils Holgersson* – in particular for the idea of placing the protagonist in a borderland between the animal

and the human world.

8. Vivi Edström observes that Lagerlöf, when living in Landskrona, ‘var minst lika mycket vänd mot Danmark som mot Sverige’ (Edström 2001:62) (looked towards Denmark at least as much as towards Sweden). Ulla-Britt Lagerroth likewise emphasises that in this period the author had ‘tät förbindelse med det rika kulturlivet på andra sidan Sundet och därmed också med sådana kretsar och institutioner, där den nordiska tanken hölls synnerligen levande’ (Lagerroth 2000:130) (close connections with the rich cultural life on the other side of the Öresund and consequently with the kind of circles and institutions in which the pan-Scandinavian ideal was particularly kept alive). Similarly, Jørgen Ravn argues that the author’s connection with Copenhagen and its intellectual life in the 1880s and 1890s had ‘en overordentlig betydning for hele hendes udvikling som forfatterinde’ (Ravn 1958:150) (an extraordinary importance for the whole of her development as an author).
9. The article was originally published in *Nordens årsbok*, 1920, pp. 67-81, and reprinted 1945 in the posthumous collection *Från skilda tider* (From Various Times) to which the passages quoted here refer.
10. The first referendum, on 10 February 1920, involved the northern zone of the disputed area, Schleswig/Slesvig, and resulted in a Danish majority of 74%. The subsequent referendum in the central zone took place on 14 March and gave a German majority of 80% (Lund 1994-2001: vol. 7 (1997):366).
11. The establishment of Askov Folk High School was the result of a relocation of Denmark’s first folk high school, founded 1844 in the village of Rødding which became part of Prussia after 1864 (Lund 1994-2001: vol. 2 (1995):73).
12. The notion of a powerhouse should be taken quite literally. One major turning point in the text sees the author invited up into the school’s own power station in which experiments with the exploitation of wind energy are carried out. The building is thus embedded in the national complex in a country that, as the text has it, possesses no coal or water power ‘men en sådan ofantlig rikedom på blåst’ (Lagerlöf 1945:28) (but such enormous resources of wind). It is from this vantage point and by means of the views into the disputed territory it offers that the author realises that the seemingly remote and isolated school is in fact carefully and precariously positioned in a larger (inter)national geography.
13. Following the conclusions of peace between Denmark and Sweden in 1658 and 1660, the Danish districts east of the Sound, the regions of Skåne, Halland and Blekinge, were transferred to Sweden (Lund 1994-2001: vol. 17 (2000):375).
14. Moretti’s observation is made in connection with his analysis of the spaces occupied by historical novels and concerns the nation’s internal borders. It seems possible, however, to widen his argument as attempted here.
15. And, according to Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, typical of the ‘grammar’ of the national imagination as such (Anderson 1991:184-85).