Selma Lagerlöf's *Löwensköldska ringen*: Travel, Transfer and the Transformative Significance of Narration

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THE topic of this paper is a novel by Selma Lagerlöf on which Peter Graves published an innovative analysis in *Scandinavica* in 1997, 'Narrator, Theme and Covert Plot: A Reading of Selma Lagerlöf's *Löwensköldska ringen*'. Translated into Swedish as 'Berättaren, temat och den dolda intrigen. En läsning av Selma Lagerlöfs *Löwensköldska ringen*', the article was republished in 2005. Here I want to build on the work Peter undertook in his article; and as it happens, the title of the symposium in Peter's honour neatly summarises some of the key aspects of Lagerlöf's novel and my approach to it. In the present context, 'travel' and 'transfer' refer chiefly to the fabula of the novel, in Mieke Bal's definition 'a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors' (1999: 5); but it is the transformative significance of the narration of *Löwensköldska ringen* that is the focus of Peter's and my interest. Let me explain.

Lagerlöf published *Löwensköldska ringen* in 1925. It is the first volume of a trilogy, with the second volume, *Charlotte Löwensköld*, appearing the same year and the third, *Anna Svärd*, in 1928. In many respects, the first volume is quite different from the other two, so focusing exclusively on *Löwensköldska ringen* does not pose any real problems. The fabula of the novel, the 'travel' and 'transfer' of my title, centres on a ghost story. Set in the province of Värmland in the eighteenth century, it revolves around a ring given by Karl XII to one of his generals, Bengt Löwensköld. The ring is of gold with a red cornelian engraved with the king's monogram, and the general treasures it so highly that he insists on being buried with it. But when he dies, in the early 1740s, Sweden is a poor country, exhausted by the lengthy period of warfare of Karl XII's reign, and the lure of the ring is irresistible. The ring is stolen from the

Löwensköld tomb, and this marks the beginning of what is to become several decades of 'travel' and 'transfer' during which the dead general haunts those who have his ring in their possession, apparently bringing misfortune, accidents and, indeed, death to some of them. The ring is eventually returned to the tomb, sewn into the tassel of a cap attached to the branch of a bush that a young woman manoeuvres down a mouse hole into the vault:

> Så med ens, då nästan hela spöet var nere i jorden, kände hon, att det med en häftig knyck rycktes ur hennes hand. Det for ner i hålet och försvann.
>
> Det kunde ju vara möjligt, att det hade fallit bara genom sin egen tyngd, men hon var alldeles säker om att det hade ryckts ifrån henne.[1] (Lagerlöf 1952: 93)

So much for the 'travel' and 'transfer'. What Peter has done in his article is to read this ghost story with an emphasis on narrative and narration, in other words on the transformative significance of the story which, in Mieke Bal's definition is the fabula as 'presented in a certain manner' (1999: 5). As a result, he has been able to argue that the text has a covert plot, a term he has borrowed from Cedric Watts who has spelled out the difference between overt plots and covert plots as follows: the covert plot is 'another purposeful sequence, but one which is partly hidden'; it 'proves to organise and explain those elements of the text which at first may have seemed odd or anomalous, obscure or redundant; and the whole text is in various ways transformed' (1984: 30). In Peter's reading, *Löwensköldska ringen* has a covert plot that is anti-militarist. 'Right from the opening pages of the story', Peter has found, 'the embedded elements of the covert plot simultaneously emphasize the king/ring relationship and undermine a heroic reading of the king's deeds' (1997: 17). Peter's argument about the prominence of anti-militarism in the novel is based on that of Vivi Edström, who in 1986 read the entire Löwensköld trilogy in the light of gender and anti-militarism, albeit with a focus on the characters (1986: 155-84). However, when Edström expanded her reading of the trilogy in her definitive study of Lagerlöf published in 2002, *Selma Lagerlöf. Livets vågspel*, she made no reference to Peter's analysis (2002: 484-526). And while the most recent analysis of the Löwensköld trilogy, by Anna Bohlin in her 2008 doctoral thesis *Röstens anatomi*, does refer to Peter's article, Bohlin relegates this material to footnotes. Moreover, with reference to the section on

1 'All at once, when almost the whole switch was below ground, she felt it being snatched from her hand with a jerk. It fell into the hole and vanished.

Although it was possible that it had simply fallen from its own weight, she was absolutely certain it had been pulled from her' (Lagerlöf 2011: 100). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

Karl XII in Chapter III of *Löwensköldska ringen*, a section that Peter has read as a key example of the covert plot highlighting the 'dark power' of the king/ring (1997: 18), Bohlin concludes that this section is chiefly about the *love* between the soldier king and his citizens and, indeed, an illustration of love as synonymous with statesmanship: 'kärlek är statskonst' (2008: 206).

This reading hardly succeeds in doing justice to the text, and it certainly does not take us very far into the novel. The anti-militarist readings proposed by Vivi Edström and Peter Graves seem to me to make far more sense, and what I want to do here is develop Peter's narratological reading in a context of poststructuralism and gender. Among my most important sources of inspiration are Mieke Bal, who has developed narratology in cultural analysis, including gender, and Susan S. Lanser, who has analysed narrative voice, especially in works by women writers.

I am going to start by looking more closely at the section in Chapter III of *Löwensköldska ringen* about Karl XII participating in – unannounced – a church service in Karlstad. According to Peter, the representation here is 'characterized by subversive counterpoint' (1997: 17). I agree, but I think the subversion is both more radical and more extensive than Peter has allowed for.

What happens in this section is that Karl XII, towards the end of his reign when the people of Sweden have been suffering the consequences of warfare for several decades, walks into the church in Karlstad one Sunday when the service has already begun and the minister is in the pulpit. The king, who is on his own, stops quietly just inside the door and remains standing there, but then he is spotted by a member of the congregation, who immediately stands up:

> Grannarna i bänken torde väl ha undrat varför han så gjorde, och då viskade han åt dem, att kungen var i kyrkan. Och ovillkorligen reste man sig då hela bänken utefter, *såsom man brukade göra, då Guds egna ord lästes upp från altare eller predikstol*.[2] (Lagerlöf 1952: 17; my italics)

The minister is in the pulpit, the Word of God is being preached, and the power of the Word of God is reiterated by the power of the Word of the King:

> Han var annars en soldatkonung och var van, att hans soldater gärna gick i döden för honom. Men här i kyrkan var han omgiven av enkla borgare och

2 'His neighbors in the pew must have wondered why, so he whispered to them that the King was in church. Without exception, one by one, everyone in the pew rose, *as they did when the word of God was being proclaimed at the altar or the pulpit*' (Lagerlöf 2011: 26; my italics).

> hantverkare, av vanliga svenska män och kvinnor, som aldrig hade lystrat till ett givakt. Men det behövdes blott, att han visade sig ibland dem, så var de under hans välde. De skulle ha gått med honom vart han ville, de skulle ha gett honom vad han önskade, de trodde på honom, de tillbad honom.[3] (Lagerlöf 1952: 18)

Power here is unmistakably gendered, and it is simultaneously associated with the Word of God, defined in terms of the Swedish State Lutheran Church, and the Word of the King. This is power that is at once masculine and monological. All in all, this is a neat example of phallogocentrism, the conjunction of phallocentrism, 'a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power' (Moi 1985: 179), and logocentrism. In my reading, then, it is not just militarism that is being deconstructed in this novel, but phallogocentrism as the very system that props it up.

However, before we move on to explore how this is being done in the text, we need to take another look at the famous ring. Vivi Edström argued in 1986 that the ring 'står i förbund med krig och våld och sociala orättvisor'[4] (1986: 157); and, as I have indicated above, Peter has emphasised the relationship between the king and the ring, pointing out that the king, too, is 'a bearer of the dark power' of the ring, and that at the centre of this dark power 'lies the moral corruption it engenders in those who come within its orbit' (1997: 17, 18). Significantly, the ring is a signet ring, a signet according to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* being 'a small seal usu. set in a finger-ring, used with or instead of a signature to authenticate a (formal or official) document etc.' There can be no doubt that this ring, directly associated with masculine power and with writing, is a symbol of phallogocentrism in this novel. The ghost story, i.e. the reading of the dead general as determined to reclaim his ring and causing disaster and death to those who have it in their possession, then becomes a measure of the continuing power of phallogocentrism. But as Peter has begun to indicate in his article, this power is called into question, is deconstructed. How, then, is this achieved?

In the 'Afterword' to her English translation of Lagerlöf's novel, Linda Schenck has pointed out that a 'stream of ambiguity runs very deep in *The Löwensköld Ring*':

3 'Being a King and soldier, he was accustomed to his men unquestioningly going to their deaths for him. But in this church he was surrounded by simple townspeople and artisans, Swedish commoners who had never stood to attention on command. Yet all he need[ed] do was appear among them and they were in his power. They would have followed him anywhere, given him anything, they believed in him, idolized him' (Lagerlöf 2011: 27). The original has 'need'.

4 'is connected with war and violence and social injustice'.

> The superficial simplicity of the story itself belies layer upon layer of complexity. Question after question emerges, usually to be answered in at least two apparently mutually exclusive but fully possible ways, leaving the reader uncomfortably uncertain of what he is 'supposed' to think. (2011: 104)

I prefer the term narratee for the abstract function that is the receiver of the narrated text (Bal 1999: 63) – and *Löwensköldska ringen* certainly has a prominent one. Peter takes the numerous caveats in the narrative – examples such as 'var det inte omöjligt'[5] (Lagerlöf 1952: 8), 'Säkert väckte det mycken förvåning'[6] (Lagerlöf 1952: 47) – as serving to increase the authority of the narrator (1997: 12). But in my reading, the key effect of this narrative feature is to reinforce the role of the dialogue developing between the narrator and the narratee. In his epochal survey of oral and literary narrative, Walter Ong has written about nineteenth-century novelists tending repeatedly to 'remind themselves that they are not telling a story but writing one in which both author and reader are having difficulty situating themselves' (Ong 2002: 101-02). This, however, strikes me as a somewhat biased perspective, and the 'difficulty' can just as well be perceived as an asset, an advantage. In the context of my argument, the significance of dialogues is that they help deconstruct monologues.

The prominence of the narratee in *Löwensköldska ringen*, with its linkage to the possibility of varying interpretations, is all the more important given that there are so many other features of this narrative that similarly open up for different interpretations. There is plenty of dialogue in the form of direct speech, with no specific indication as to how the sequence is to be read. An obvious example is the dialogue between the farmer Bård and his wife in Chapter II, which begins with them setting out in the middle of the night to ensure that the general's ring is safe in his tomb, yet somehow ends with them stealing the ring and bringing it home. There are sections in the novel of indirect discourse, direct thought and free indirect thought, perhaps most notably in Chapter VIII, in which Marit Eriksdotter, having found the ring sewn into the tassel of a cap, reflects on the events more than 30 years previously when her fiancé, her father and his brother, accused of having stolen the ring from Bård's son, were all executed. Again, there is plenty of scope here for varying interpretations:

> Hon lade ner luvan och lutade sig åter tillbaka mot trappräcket för att se in i det förgångna.

5 'it's quite possible' (Lagerlöf 2011: 18).
6 'It must have come as a great surprise' (Lagerlöf 2011: 54).

> Hon var i skogen den morgonen, då Ingilbert hade blivit skrämd till döds. Hon såg hur Paul tillsammans med hennes far och farbror hade stått lutad över liket. [...]
>
> Men Ingilbert hade sytt in ringen i luvan, då han vandrade hemifrån. Han hade kanske trott, att han skulle bli förföljd, och därför hade han sökt gömma den. Och sedan han fallit, hade ingen tänkt på att söka ringen i luvan, Paul Eliasson mindre än någon annan.
>
> Det var så alltsammans hade gått till! Hon kunde ha svurit på det, men man kan aldrig vara nog säker.[7] (Lagerlöf 1952: 63)

Differing opinions, possibilities and interpretations become even more prominent in the sections of the narrative that highlight gossip. And there is no shortage of such sections, for example as news spreads when people gather for church on a Sunday that the three men from Olsby have been put behind bars on suspicion of having taken the ring; or as people learn of His Majesty's verdict on the sentence meted out by the Court of Appeal; or as the three men are executed:

> *Folket hade överlagt och prövat sinsemellan*, och de hade kommit till den övertygelsen, att gudsdomen borde ha tolkats så, att alla tre anklagade var oskyldiga. Den gamle generalen hade låtit dem alla tre göra högsta kastet. Det kunde inte betyda annat. Ingen av dem hade tagit hans ring.[8] (Lagerlöf 1952: 62; my italics)

Gossip, according to Patricia Spacks, '[m]ore insistently than other forms of conversation [...] involves exchange not merely, not even mainly, of information, and not solely of understanding, but of point of view' (1985: 21-22). The masculine monologism fundamental to phallogocentrism is deconstructed, and with it the ghost story. For surely it was not necessarily the dead general who had set fire to Bård's farm once he and his wife had stolen the ring? Nor was it necessarily the ghost of the general who had frightened Bård's son

7 'She set the cap down and leaned back against the railing once more, to look into the past.
She was in the forest that morning when Ingilbert had been frightened to death. She saw how Paul and her father and uncle had stood leaning over his corpse. […]
Ingilbert, however, had sewn the ring into his cap before leaving home. Perhaps he had expected to be pursued and had wanted to hide it. And when he fell, no one thought of looking in his cap for the ring. Least of all Paul Eliasson.
That was how it had happened! She would have sworn to it, but you never know for certain' (Lagerlöf 2011: 69).

8 '*After due consideration and much discussion*, the people had determined that the Divine Judgment ought to have been interpreted to mean that all three of the accused men were equally innocent. The old General had made them all cast the highest possible roll. It could mean nothing else. None of them had taken his ring' (Lagerlöf 2011: 68; my italics).

to death in the forest when he was trying to escape with the ring: Ingilbert Bårdsson, as indicated by the general's son, might well have taken Marit Eriksdotter's uncle, a former soldier who still walked and dressed like one, for the general himself. And Marit Eriksdotter unknowingly had the ring for three decades, sewn into the cap she had received as a memento of her fiancé, with no sign of the dead general wanting to claim it back. When, finally, Adrian Löwensköld finds himself face to face with the general who has been on his mind for so long and whom he has been so eager to help, only to come close to being frightened to death by the ghost's expression of 'jordiska passioner' ('worldly passions') and 'vild lystnad' ('frenzied craving') (Lagerlöf 1952: 80; 2011: 87), could we not read this event as an elaborate nightmare?

There can be no doubt, then, that *Löwensköldska ringen* with its numerous caveats, instances of dialogue in the form of direct speech, examples of indirect discourse, direct thought and free indirect thought, plus sections foregrounding gossip, repeatedly destabilises the masculine monologism integral to phallogocentrism. And given the amount of attention we have now paid to the narration of the text, including the prominence of the narratee, we need to turn to the narrator to take our analysis further.

Drawing on the analysis of the narrator in Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Peter Graves argues that the narratorial 'I' in *Löwensköldska ringen*, while not a narrator agent, is much more than a mere observer:

> [S]he is active, she can add to or she can take away from what she has inherited, she can veil and she can reveal, and she can and does intrude both overtly and covertly. She is both a self-conscious narrator – that is, she is aware that she is 'writing, thinking [and] speaking' – and she is a dramatized narrator – that is, we recognize her as a character in her own right, as someone who gives us her own opinions and feelings. (1997: 8, referring to Booth 1961: 151-55)

I am keen to distance myself from the anthropomorphisation of the narrator that is so prominent in Booth and also in Graves; in Bal's defintion, the narrator merely 'narrates, i.e. utters language which may be termed narrative since it represents a story' (1999: 19). But there is a good reason for Peter's analysis of Lagerlöf's text, as he reminds us that in:

> [A]ll eleven chapters of *Löwensköldska ringen* the presence of the narrator is tangible, and in four of these chapters the presence is extensive and usually accompanied by the narratorial 'I', who involves herself in commentary or discussion. (1997: 9)

The four chapters are Chapter I, which introduces the portrait of Bengt Löwensköld, the general; Chapter III, on Karl XII taking part in the church service in Karlstad; Chapter VII, the narrative of which begins with the celebration of the fire on the hearth and moves on to the stories about Bengt Löwensköld, including the theft of his ring and the divine judgement passed on the alleged perpetrators of the crime; and the section towards the end of Chapter X, which follows immediately after the text about Adrian Löwensköld's encounter with the ghost and begins: 'Pennan faller ur min hand. Är det inte lönlöst att försöka skriva ner detta?'[9] (Lagerlöf 1952: 81). In Peter's reading it is 'particularly, though not solely, the appearances of the narrator that alert us to the sub-reforming units' which constitute the novel's covert plot (1997: 7-8).

Lars Ulvenstam, analysing the Löwensköld trilogy in 1955, has no doubt that it is Selma Lagerlöf herself who 'oupphörligt röjer sin egen närvaro i verket och befäl över stoffet'[10] (1955: 185); and referring to the instances of the narratorial 'I' in *Löwensköldska ringen*, he concludes that '[i]bland stiger författarinnan fram [...] utan förklädnad'[11] (ibid.). Gunnel Weidel, writing nine years later, shares his views (1964: 287-88). Peter's analysis is obviously rather more sophisticated; however, as has been clear from a number of quotations above, he consistently reads the narrator as female. 'She is a woman', he states with reference to the opening chapter, 'although she does not reveal that directly until much later in the story' (1997: 11) – a point, however, that he does not follow up with any proof of the femininity of the narrator. As a matter of fact, there is no such unequivocal proof in this narrative – unless we are prepared to follow in the footsteps of Ulvenstam and Weidel and connect the references to the province of Värmland and a phrase such as 'Pennan faller ur min hand' (Lagerlöf 1952: 81) ('The pen falls from my hand [Lagerlöf 2011: 88]) to Lagerlöf herself. Indeed, there is no indication at all in *Löwensköldska ringen* of the gender of the narrator.

To get a clearer idea of the complexity of the narrator in Lagerlöf's novel, we need to explore the implications of the difference between the fabula and the story. The fabula of *Löwensköldska ringen* differs markedly from the story, for while the fabula about the general's ring is set in the eighteenth century, the narrator representing this is located about 200 years later, in the twentieth century.

9 'The pen falls from my hand. Is it not pointless to try to put this in writing?' (Lagerlöf 2011: 88).
10 'again and again reveals her presence in the work and her command of the material'.
11 'sometimes the female author emerges without disguise'.

In Mieke Bal's terminology, a narratorial 'I' that can be 'identified with a character in the fabula it itself narrates' is 'a character-bound narrator' (1999: 22). But the narratorial 'I' in *Löwensköldska ringen* clearly is not a character in the fabula about the general's ring which, apart from the four sections singled out above, tends to be narrated as if by an external narrator, as for example at the opening of Chapter X:

> Adrian Löwensköld låg och sov i ett gavelrum på vinden, då han väcktes av ett lätt buller. Han slog upp ögonen, och som luckorna inte var tillskruvade och ute rådde ljus sommarnatt, såg han tydligt, att dörren gled upp.[12] (Lagerlöf 1952: 78)

The narratorial 'I' is the character-bound narrator in the fabula about the *telling* of the fabula about the General's ring, in other words the fabula that emerges in the four sections detailed above. The contrast with the narration of another short novel by Lagerlöf, its fabula also set in the past, is striking: in *Herr Arne's penningar* (1903; *Lord Arne's Silver*), which draws on a far wider range of versions – written and possibly also oral – of an historical event than does the fabula of *Löwensköldska ringen* (Weidel 1964: 208-21; cf. Ulvenstam 1955: 22-26, 32-43), we have no narratorial 'I' pointing up alternatives and interpretations, but merely an external narrator throughout. What is the impact of what is effectively a double narrative focus in *Löwensköldska ringen* – on the fabula set in the eighteenth century about the general's ring, and on the fabula set in the twentieth century about the telling of the former fabula – especially in the context of our preoccupation with the deconstruction of phallogocentrism in this novel?

In *Fictions of Authority*, her study of narrative voice in prose fiction by women writers, Susan S. Lanser has argued that the adoption of 'authorial voice' – heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential, and with 'a privileged status among narrative forms' – has amounted to the transgression of 'gendered rhetorical codes', at least when narrators in texts by female authors have set themselves forth as authorities (1992: 15-18). The use of 'personal voice' on the other hand, by which Lanser means narrators who are 'self-consciously telling their own histories', has been perceived as 'less formidable' for women writers, 'since an authorial narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgment, while a personal narrator claims only the validity of one person's right to interpret her experience' (1992: 18-19).

12 'Adrian Löwensköld lay sleeping in a gable bedroom in the attic when he was awakened by a slight noise. He opened his eyes, and as the shutters were not latched and it was a light summer night, he clearly saw the door glide open' (Lagerlöf 2011: 85).

As I hope has been clear from my analysis so far, the phallogocentrism illustrated by the fabula about the ring belonging to the general, one of the many 'krigare [...] som hade stått under kung Karls befäl och plöjt honom en fåra genom Polen och Ryssland'[13] (Lagerlöf 1952: 6), is deconstructed by the narration of *Löwensköldska ringen*. But the story about the general's ring which, if seen in isolation, could have been told by an authorial voice as in the case of the story in *Herr Arnes penningar*, is complicated by being presented as a story within a story. And the narrator of the framework story represents personal voice which, according to Lanser, has been perceived as more appropriate for a woman writer (1992: 19). Seen in terms of gender and narrative voice, in other words, the framework story plays a key role in deconstructing the phallogocentrism of the story about the general's ring. From this perspective, the elements of the framework story that may appear to equal the narrator with Lagerlöf herself can be read as a form of play with the identity of the famous author, a device not entirely different from the play with 'Selma Lagerlöf' that I have traced in *Dagbok för Selma Ottilia Lovisa Lagerlöf* (1932; *The Diary of Selma Lagerlöf*, 1936) (Forsås-Scott 1998), and which would then add, in *Löwensköldska ringen*, to the zest with which phallogocentrism is taken apart.

The framework story, however, has a further and crucial dimension. The opening of Chapter VII, about the fire on the hearth that spreads warmth and light and so revives in those gathered around it 'lusten att leva det fattiga och besvärliga livet'[14] (Lagerlöf 1952: 44), explicitly connects narrative and community:

> Vad som framför allt hörde hemma vid eldbrasan, det var väl dock berättelsen om alla slags bragder och äventyr. Det var sådant, som roade både gammal och ung, och det var sådant, som det aldrig tog ände på.[15] (Lagerlöf 1952: 44-45)

Given the power of the stories about Karl XII and his men in particular to fascinate listeners of all categories, the transition from the narrator in the opening section of the chapter – not marked here by 'jag' ('I') but clearly included in the pronoun in the opening sentence, 'Det ska inte förnekas, att

13 'soldiers serving in the ranks of King Karl […], the ones who had ploughed him a furrow through Poland and Russia' (Lagerlöf 2011: 16).

14 'the will to go on, however difficult and poverty-stricken their lives were' (Lagerlöf 2011: 51-52).

15 'One of the main ingredients of these evenings by the fire must have been the stories about great feats and adventures. Everyone, old and young alike, loved to hear stories, and the supply was endless' (Lagerlöf 2011: 52).

hos *oss* i Värmland var skogarna vida på den tiden'[16] (Lagerlöf 1952: 43; my italics) – to the narrator conveying the story of the theft of the general's ring and its consequences, is virtually seamless:

> Så att man kan förstå, att om någonting skulle vara i stånd att få folk intresserade och nyfikna och upprörda, så var det detta, att ringen hade blivit återfunnen och förlorad igen, och att Ingilbert hade hittats död i skogen, och att Olsbykarlarna nu misstänktes för att ha tillägnat sig ringen och satt häktade. [...]
>
> Det talades inte om något annat. Varje kväll hölls det ting vid spiselbrasan både i stora och små stugor, både hos torpare och storfolk.[17] (Lagerlöf 1952: 46)

In my reading the narrators in *Löwensköldska ringen*, the character-bound narrator in four of the chapters or sections of these, and the external narrator of the fabula about the general's ring, effectively merge in what Lanser has termed 'communal voice', the narrative authority:

> *invested in a definable community and textually inscribed* either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or *through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community*' (1992: 21; my italics).

As if to confirm the significance of Peter's observation that three female characters are involved in the return of the general's ring, Märta Bårdsdotter, Marit Eriksdotter, and Malvina Spaak (1997: 9), all of whom, moreover, are single, Lanser has pointed out that communal voice 'shifts the text away from individual protagonists and personal plots, calling into question the heterosocial contract that has defined woman's place in Western fiction' (1992: 22). There can be no doubt, it seems to me, that we are dealing with a narrator who is part of a community preoccupied with stories about Karl XII and his men, stories which, given that they are the king's 'bästa kvarlåtenskap' ('greatest legacy') (Lagerlöf 1952: 45; 2011: 52), insist on being passed on. All those features of the narration that open up for differing interpretations, along with the instances of gossip, are reinforced, in other words, by a narrative

16 'It cannot be denied that in Värmland in those days *our* forests were vast' (Lagerlöf 2011: 50; my italics).

17 'So it is easy to see that if anything would make people interested and curious and upset, it would be learning that the ring had been recovered and lost again, that Ingilbert had been found dead in the woods, and that the men from Olsby were now behind bars on suspicion of having appropriated the ring. [...]

People could hardly talk about anything else. Court was in session every evening around the fire in every house and cottage, those of farm folk and gentry alike' (Lagerlöf 2011: 53).

voice that underlines the dialogism that is central to the text. In light of the anti-militarism of this novel, there is indeed a wonderful irony implicit in the phrase I have just quoted, as the communal narrative voice completes the comprehensive deconstruction of masculine monologism in *Löwensköldska ringen*.

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In a letter written in 1908, Selma Lagerlöf assured her addressee that 'vi författare anse en bok nästan som färdig, då vi väl ha funnit stilen varpå den låter sig skrivas'[18] (1969: 71). Thank you, Peter, for taking us beyond the simplistic readings of *Löwensköldska ringen* and pinpointing the significance of the style – in the widest sense – for our interpretation of Lagerlöf's endlessly challenging text.[19]

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18 'we authors regard a book as close to completion once we have found the style in which it allows itself to be written'.

19 Unless otherwise stated, translations into English are my own.

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