

REVIEW

Bjarne Thorup Thomsen

*Lagerlöfs litterære landvinding.
Nation, mobilitet og modernitet i
Nils Holgersson og tilgrænsende tekster*

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IN my primary school in Sweden, in the mid-1950s, we read Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (1906-07) aloud in class. During our weekly sessions we each took it in turn to read, and for all the interruptions and classroom distractions, our hours with Nils Holgersson, as far as I can remember, kept us riveted.

Of course we connected Lagerlöf's text with the Swedish geography and history we were studying simultaneously, but to us it was first and foremost the story of a boy who travelled on the back of a goose from the south of Sweden to Lapland in the north and back again, experiencing one adventure after the other and invariably extricating himself from situations made all the more tricky by his miniscule size. Once Lagerlöf got the idea of a boy travelling on goose-back, she realised that the school reader she had been commissioned to write could also become a work of art; yet, as a trained teacher, she never lost sight of her main audience. But the adventures that tantalised my nine-year-old classmates and myself also introduced us, in Thorup Thomsen's reading, to a sophisticated argument about the nation, and more specifically about what the nation might be and how it might be viewed. Directly connected to these issues, according to Thorup Thomsen, is the text's problematisation of the form and function of the novel. Drawing on Franco Moretti's argument that 'the nation-state [...] found the novel. And viceversa: the novel found

the nation-state', Thorup Thomsen approaches Nils Holgersson as 'et særligt raffineret eksempel på en tekst, der besidder de egenskaber, Moretti tildeler romanen i forhold til nationen: Her formes dialektikken mellem lokalt, nationalt og internationalt til en fantastisk fortælling' (a particularly refined example of a text with all the characteristics Moretti ascribes to the novel in relation to the nation: Here the dialectics between the local, the national and the international takes the form of a fantasy narrative).

In October 1905, just over a year before the publication of the first volume of *Nils Holgersson*, the union between Sweden and Norway was dissolved, an event that Thorup Thomsen links to the foregrounding of 'det nationale landskab' (the national landscape) as 'bogens egentlige emne' (the real topic of the book). While Chapter 1, on the cartography of the nation in Lagerlöf's text, relies on theoretical material from Benedict Anderson and also Fredric Jameson, Chapter 2, on the tensions between the poor small-holding in the far south of the country that is Nils Holgersson's home and the expanses and possibilities opened up by the wild geese as they migrate across Sweden, draws chiefly on Bakhtin and also to some extent on Bhabha. Thorup Thomsen argues convincingly for the text's foregrounding of regional differences as fundamental to our understanding of the entire nation and disagrees with critics who have discerned a form of 'regional nationalism' in *Nils Holgersson*: 'Parallelt med at værket muliggør sin læsers virtuelle mobilitet i og fortrologiggørelse med nationen [...] sætter den sin svenske læser i stand til at se sin egen region med andre øjne' (Parallel with making possible the virtual mobility of its reader and his/her familiarisation with the nation [...], the work enables its Swedish reader to view her/his region with different eyes). In Chapter 4, 'Flok og folk' (Flock and people), Thorup Thomsen demonstrates the significance of the flock of geese as a symbol of the people of the nation, emphasising the role of hybridity and partial integration as Nils and other outsiders become part of it. Here the chapter in Volume I of Lagerlöf's novel, about the annual meeting of the cranes and other birds and animals around a piece of flat ground at Kullaberg in Skåne – 'et naturens og nationens teater' (nature's and the nation's theatre) – is cleverly read as a renegotiation of a collective subject: 'Det udtrykker en utopi om et folk med fælles fokus, længsler, følelser og regler' (It expresses a utopia about a people with a joint focus, desires and rules). Chapter 5 explores Lagerlöf's text as the type of Bildungsroman that Bakhtin has categorised as 'the novel of emergence' and in which 'man', according to Bakhtin, 'is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being'. *Nils Holgersson* turns out to be a Bildungsroman in several respects, with Thorup Thomsen linking the text's continuing relevance to its demonstration and problematisation of the effects

of our understanding of both the nation and the novel with regard to form and meaning.

I am convinced that Thorup Thomsen, by foregrounding the renegotiations going on in the text, has put his finger on one of the main reasons for the status and continuing appeal of *Nils Holgersson*, not just in Sweden but across the globe. The text, once regarded as an obstacle to awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Lagerlöf (she eventually became a Nobel Laureate in 1909), has become one of her best-known works in Sweden and her greatest success internationally. Thorup Thomsen's analysis, which combines perceptive readings of detail with illuminating over-arching perspectives, demonstrating also the relevance of aspects of many other works by Lagerlöf in the process, is an important contribution to our understanding of the wider significance of *Nils Holgersson*. Often enhanced by elegant turns of phrase, this study is a pleasure to read. An outline of the issues to be discussed in the introduction would have been helpful, however, as would a name index. There are some typing errors; and the eagle in *Nils Holgersson* is not named Gonzo (p. 114) but Gorgo. But there is no doubt that this is an innovative study, helpfully sidelining the notion of Lagerlöf as a national icon and consistently foregrounding the text in its national context. The dimensions of *Nils Holgersson* are all the more remarkable given that its primary audience were Swedish school-children more than a century ago.

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