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Lagerlöf on the Border with Norway

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Swedish author Selma Lagerlöf is strongly associated with the region of Värmland, which borders on Norway. While more recent research has justifiably critiqued a tendency of traditional Lagerlöf scholarship to overstate in confining ways the regional dimensions of the author's work and perceived persona, instead promoting nation-orientated and transnational perspectives on her work and its impact, the role of Värmland in Lagerlöf's life and writing is nevertheless manifest.¹ In light of the proximity to the border with Norway that was a geographical fact of a considerable part of Lagerlöf's life, Norwegian literary historian Francis Bull, in his essay 'Selma Lagerlöf og Norge' ('Selma Lagerlöf and Norway'), expresses surprise that the author had little personal experience of the neighbouring country:

Besnyderlig må det virke på en nordmann å oppdage at Selma Lagerlöf praktisk talt ikke kjente Norge av selvsyn. [...] Å ta en tur til Norge skulle ha vært lett og nærliggende for henne, men det skjedde ikke ofte.²

1. For a comprehensive study of the history of the critical reception of Lagerlöf's literary work and public persona, see Nordlund 2005.

2. Bull 1958: 59.

It is peculiar for a Norwegian to realise that Selma Lagerlöf did practically not know Norway first-hand. [...] Taking a trip to Norway would have seemed easy and an obvious thing for her to do, but it seldom happened.³

The two recorded occasions on which Lagerlöf did visit Norway were in the summer of 1902 (southern Norway including Larvik) and the summer of 1904. The second occasion is of particular literary interest because it is bound up with a journey of discovery to northern Sweden which the author undertook in preparation for her famous nation-defining travelogue, school textbook, and fantasy for children *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (*Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey through Sweden*), which was published in two volumes in 1906 and 1907. Lagerlöf's sphere of interest during this northbound journey did clearly not exclude Norway, since she visited both Narvik, travelling on the final stretch of the so-called iron-ore railway line between Sweden and Norway, opened as recently as 1903, and also Trondheim. However, Lagerlöf never seems to have visited Norway after the dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905.

The fact that Lagerlöf's actual encounters with Norway were limited should not lead to an assumption of a lack of appreciation of Norwegian culture, nature, or indeed geopolitics on her part. Francis Bull quotes Lagerlöf's assessment of the Norwegians as the most aesthetically gifted of the Scandinavian peoples. He cites, furthermore, Lagerlöf's expression of privilege in having lived in an era when Europe's foremost authors wrote in a language, i.e. Norwegian, which she could access without translation, and in which they explored conditions that resembled closely those in her own country.⁴

3. All translations into English are the author's.

4. Bull 1958: 56.

Writers such as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Henrik Ibsen had a profound influence on Lagerlöf's work. Obvious cases in point are the novels *Jerusalem* (1901–02), inspired by Bjørnson's peasant tales, and *Bannlyst* (*Banished*, 1918), inspired by Ibsen's drama *Fruen fra havet* (*The Lady from the Sea*). Both novels testify to Lagerlöf's indebtedness to her Norwegian predecessors with regard to both the topographical and psychological dimensions of her writing.

As for Lagerlöf's perspectives on the geopolitical relationship between Norway and Sweden and on the Norwegian national question, we shall now turn our attention to a comparison of two lesser-known texts by the author: one from shortly before the dissolution of the union, and the other published almost thirty years later, depicting a visit to the borderland. Our discussion will aim to demonstrate, firstly, Lagerlöf's keen interest in a continuum and close bond between the two countries; secondly, through context, her support for Norwegian independence; and thirdly, her ambivalent appreciation of the post-unionistic border demarcation itself. My hope is that the topics of topography, nation, travel, and Scandinavian connections will resonate with my friend and colleague Arne Kruse's broader scholarly interests.

Countries baked together

In 1959, Lagerlöf scholar Erland Lagerroth published a hitherto unknown Lagerlöf manuscript which he had discovered in the archives of the Royal Library in Stockholm.⁵ There is a strong likelihood that the short manuscript, which is entitled 'Läsebok. Brödlimpa' ('Textbook. Bread Loaf'), was planned

5. Lagerlöf 1959.

as a chapter of *Nils Holgersson*. More recently, Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, likewise an authority on Lagerlöf, goes as far as contending that the manuscript text was intended as the overall introduction to *Nils Holgersson*.⁶ What, then, are the contents of a chapter with such a prominent presumed role, and why was the chapter omitted?

The chapter offers an allegory of the geological genesis and development of the peninsula of Norway and Sweden, asserting an almost organic affinity between the countries. Using imagery linked to a domestic sphere of production, the manuscript conceives of the countries as the result of God's not entirely successful attempt at baking bread. Due to too much yeast in the dough, two loaves have accidentally grown together, *den ena en smula ofvanför den andra*⁷ ('one a little above the other'), without, however, losing their distinctiveness: *den ena hade blifvit hög och smal och den andra bred och platt*⁸ ('one had become high and narrow, the other wide and flat'). A dominant topographical focus of the text is placed on the shared and combining 'borderland terrain' of the two loaves: *längs efter sammanväxningen hade de sprungit upp i en hög ås*⁹ ('along the area that had grown together they [the loaves] had formed a high ridge'). Ultimately, the manuscript text maintains that the connection between the loaves/countries is so strong that separation seems impossible *utan att förstöra dem båda två*¹⁰ ('without destroying both of them').

Erland Lagerroth terms the manuscript the 'fifth gospel'¹¹ of *Nils Holgersson*, based on the argument that it offers a more extensive topographical and geological conspectus than

6. Lagerroth 2000: 141.

7. Lagerlöf 1959: 557.

8. Ibid.: 558.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.: 557.

11. Lagerroth 1959: 560.

anything found in the published version of the travel adventure, which operates on regional levels and, principally, on a Swedish national level.¹² He dates the origin of the manuscript as being prior to the spring of 1905.¹³

As for a persuasive hypothesis on the rationale behind the omission of the manuscript, we need to turn to Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, who argues that the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden in the autumn of 1905, a year or so after the presumed conception of the manuscript text and a year before the publication of the first volume of *Nils Holgersson*, rendered the emphasis of the chapter on the common ground between the two countries outdated and overtaken by developments in national politics and binational relations.¹⁴ The geopolitical conditions underpinning the textbook project had changed decisively.

While this posited connection between the dissolution of the union and the omission of the introductory chapter is a convincing one, it does not necessarily follow that the rediscovered manuscript reads as an endorsement and essentialisation of the unionistic relationship. A safer interpretation would be that the manuscript, rather than offering a geopolitical position, aimed to provide a pedagogical and imaginative account of the factual phenomenon of the ties between the two countries as they pertained to c. 1904.

Furthermore, the common ground between the countries, which the manuscript metaphorises, should not necessarily be read through the narrower lens of unionism. While respecting the Nordic nation states, Lagerlöf was a strong believer

12. For an in-depth study of the spatial design of *Nils Holgersson*, see Thorup Thomsen 2007.

13. Lagerroth 1959: 561.

14. Lagerroth 2000: 141.

in Scandinavianism and Nordism.¹⁵ Such beliefs and, more broadly, an interest in cross-border continua and transnational interfaces that informs much of Lagerlöf's writing may be reflected in the manuscript.

Finally, Lagerlöf's stance on Norwegian independence, as it was substantiated just a year or so after the assumed conception of the manuscript, is difficult to square with a reading of the manuscript as a unionistic endorsement. In the beginning of March 1905, Lagerlöf was approached by her publisher Karl Otto Bonnier, who invited her to sign a planned public petition calling for Sweden, through generosity, to attempt to keep Norway within the union. Lagerlöf, however, immediately declined the invitation in a letter to Bonnier dated 7 March 1905, and instead forcefully advocated Norwegian independence:

*Jag är [...] sedan åratal tillbaka af den åsikten att Norge bör få bli ett eget rike. Att få se det gamla norska kungadömet återupprättadt och bevittna ett helt folks jubel öfver att åter få räknas med bland själfständiga stater har länge varit en af mina drömmar.*¹⁶

I have [...] for a number of years been of the opinion that Norway should be allowed to become a nation of its own. To see the resurrection of the old Norwegian kingdom and to witness the jubilation of an entire people at again being counted among the independent states have long been one of my dreams.

She went on to argue that the discontinuation of *denna pinsamma union*¹⁷ ('this embarrassing union') would be beneficial for the national renewal of both countries and for their future co-existence:

15. For a wide-ranging exploration of Nordism in Lagerlöf, see Lagerroth 2000.
16. Lagerlöf 1969: 28.
17. Ibid.

*Och till sist skulle vi verkligen komma att bli riktiga vänner, så som vi känna oss gentemot danskarna*¹⁸ ('And finally we would become real friends in the same way as we feel towards the Danes'). She concluded that she saw no other solution than separation.

The author's argumentation appears to have persuaded the powerful publisher to perform a U-turn, since the petition Bonnier eventually published in July 1905 – signed by a sizeable segment of the Swedish cultural elite – contained clear echoes of Lagerlöf's stance: it requested the Swedish parliament to initiate the ending of a union which, instead of its aim of drawing the two nations closer, had only served to distance them from each other.¹⁹

Hard or soft border

When Lagerlöf revisited the topics of the border with Norway and the topographical relationship between Norway and Sweden some thirty years on, in an essay entitled 'Värmländsk naturskönhet' ('The Natural Beauty of Värmland') published in the collection *Höst (Autumn)* in 1933,²⁰ some noteworthy differences are observable compared with the 'Bread Loaf' manuscript. Firstly, more emphasis is now placed on (landscape) *difference* between the two nations; and secondly, the representation of the border itself has become considerably more potentiated. When confronted with the post-unionistic 'hard' borderline between the countries, Lagerlöf expresses a range of responses and mixed feelings, articulating senses of serenity, stillness, mystique, and nostalgia – possibly even an implicit longing for a future 'softening' of the border.

18. Ibid.

19. The petition is reproduced between pp. 104-105 of Bonnier 1956.

20. Lagerlöf 1933.

A common denominator between the two texts considered in this chapter is the device, recurring in Lagerlöf, of approaching landscape as something constructed or consciously created. In the 'Bread Loaf' manuscript, the creation process was, as we saw, both divine and humorously domestic. In the Värmland essay, the process is artistic as well as architectural. While the former text asserted a transnational continuum as the result of the creation, the creative outcome in the latter text is best summed up in terms of discontinuity between the two nations, which may read as a recognition of their new, fully separate statuses.

The Värmland essay likens nature to a pictorial artist who has Värmland *uppsatt på staffliet*²¹ ('placed on the easel') but has abandoned the painting in mid-process, rendering the landscape incomplete. This notion of being unfinished or lacking is reinforced in architectural terms in a subsequent passage which, notably, adds a national comparative axis that posits the Norwegian topography as a benchmark of natural beauty and the spectacular, which the Swedish topography seems unable to live up to: When nature *skapade allt det storartade och förunderligt sköna väster om Kölen*²² ('created all the magnificent and marvellously beautiful to the west of Kölen', i.e. on the Norwegian side of the mountain range), it exhausted itself and had thus tired when it was time to tackle Värmland. It had intended *något i norsk väg*²³ ('something in a Norwegian vein') with *branta, himlastormande bergåsar*²⁴ ('steep mountain slopes yearning for the sky') and had, in fact, like a competent architect, made *en fin grundritning*²⁵ ('a fine foundation drawing'), but never built it beyond the base.

21. Ibid.: 101.

22. Ibid.: 102.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

For the purposes of the present discussion, it is observable that, in addition to paying tribute to Norwegian nature, a primary message communicated in this passage is the stipulation of a much more finite border between the eastern and western topographies – and hence the two nations – than was conveyed in the ‘Bread Loaf’ text. This reading is, we shall argue by way of finishing, borne out by the continuation and conclusion of the Värmland essay.²⁶

In the essay, Lagerlöf performs in elegant ways a form of touristic sightseeing in her home region. Her means of transport is a chauffeur-driven automobile, signalling both modernity and the elevated status the author acquired in later life. The destination of the concluding and most ambitious car journey depicted in the essay is Värmland’s north-western part, Östmark, and in particular the very borderline between Sweden and Norway. As the essay reaches this end point, it seems to pit – is our argument – conflicting notions of the national border against each other. The culmination of the text could be characterised as a meditation on the phenomenology and temporality of the borderland. What meets the gaze of the author (who operates throughout the essay as an eyewitness to landscape phenomena) is a deserted and static no man’s land dominated by a finite, humanly constructed incision between the nations: *Nu var vi alltså vid resans mål, men var hade vi riksgränsen? Jo; på andra sidan sjön såg man en bred, kalhuggen fåra*²⁷ (‘Now we had reached the destination of our journey, but where was the national border? Ah yes, on the other side of the lake one saw a broad deforested furrow’). This sight evokes

26. It should be added that the essay goes on to complicate its view of Värmland’s topography by demonstrating the near magical ability of the landscape to change, surprise, and confound expectations. This, however, does not form part of the focus of the present discussion.

27. Ibid.: 112.

a mixture of responses in the narrator: a sense of solemnity, a perception of the borderland as a serene resting place (with connotations of death) for the nation, a feeling, even, that the border is also of a spiritual nature as a demarcation between a real and a supernatural sphere. The main opposition, however, seems to be between the current finality of the border and the borderland's historic role as a vibrant cross-over and transition zone:

Det var väl just därför, att här var så stilla och fridsamt, som jag måste tänka på de mängder av olika människor, som fordom hade dragit förbi på en sådan plats. Här hade det rört sig, allt detta gränsfolket, som aldrig kan hålla sig lugnt kvar i eget land, utan jämt lockas över till grannens.²⁸

I suppose it was precisely because it was so still and peaceful here that I had to think of the multitude of different people who had passed through this area in bygone days. Here they had moved about, all these border people who can never remain calmly in their own country but are always enticed to go across to the neighbouring country.

The narrator goes on to enumerate how pilgrims and soldiers, spies and smugglers, traders and jesters, poor people and rich people frequented and traversed the borderland in earlier times – a dynamism and diversity now consigned to history.

It would not seem valid or politically meaningful to interpret Lagerlöf's registration of a decline in transnational, multifaceted cross-border exchange and traffic as an advocacy of a return to a unionistic type of relationship between Norway and Sweden. More plausibly, the emphasis on the past vibrancy

28. Ibid.: 113.

of the borderland reads as a blueprint for a prospective further softening of the relationship between the nations after a degree of post-unionistic distancing.²⁹ Interestingly, what seems to be Lagerlöf's preferred notion of an open and dynamic borderland between Norway and Sweden as well as the ambiguities we have identified in her depiction of the border itself can be aligned with current trends in border studies that emphasise the 'thick', extended, porous, and uncertain character of national borders.³⁰

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29. Cf. Lagerlöf's view, quoted above, that it may take some time after the dissolution of the union before the Norwegian and the Swedish people become 'real' friends.

30. These trends may be exemplified by French anthropologist Michel Agier's study entitled *Borderlands*. See in particular 2016: 15–36. Agier asserts the uncertainty of any border between nations: 'an uncertainty that is simultaneously temporal, spatial and social. The repeated drawing of the border reaffirms, if need be, its non-natural character, as its social inscription is inversely proportional to its natural self-evidence' (2016: 22).

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