

Flying Lessons with Bjarne

Anna Bohlin

Kindness is undoubtedly a cardinal academic virtue. We are often encouraged to think the other way around: that only greed, envy, and pride will further our academic careers. Nothing could be more misleading. Kindness is often mistakenly opposed to criticism; while criticism is essential to academic thought, it may be offered kindly or unkindly. How would a new idea ever develop into a theoretical argument if not received with kind appreciation? How would new ideas ever come up in the first place, if not through kind consideration of others' thoughts? How could we ever survive academic institutions, systems, applications, and publishing policies, if kind fellowship was nowhere to be found? Many of us travel to work in other countries, and we would be lost – physically and existentially – without the kindness of academic colleagues. We simply cannot do without it. Intellectual achievements hinge on kindness, and Bjarne Thorup Thomsen has that virtue in abundance.

When does it happen that literally all the contributors of an anthology explicitly ask you, as the editor, to convey their sincere gratitude to the anonymous peer reviewer? Only when Bjarne is your peer. When is your (as the Swedish expression goes) fifty-eleventh email full of endless revisions and tedious practicalities for the contributors still met with generous words

of appreciation for *your* hard work, instead of grunting reminders of the author's own workload? Only when Bjarne is the author. And when do you reach out to a researcher you barely know to ask for support for an application – and immediately get an enthusiastic reply and an invitation to present the research project at the University of Edinburgh? Only when you reach out to Bjarne. I have a lot to thank Bjarne for.

The reason for that email asking for support, was Bjarne's brilliant study *Lagerlöfs litterære landvinding. Nation, mobilitet og modernitet i Nils Holgersson og tilgrænsende tekster* (2007). He challenged the predominant view of Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgersson's Wonderful Journey through Sweden* (1906–07) as advocating a regionalist nationalism, by investigating transitions, transgressions, tensions, and fragmentations on different levels of the literary text. *Nils Holgersson* in Bjarne's interpretation is a text where the nation is defamiliarised and recognised anew. Furthermore, the main protagonists – that is the hybrid flock of different species binding the nation together – are analysed in relation to the hybrid novel form. *Lagerlöfs litterære landvinding* is a study of directions: literary form in relation to represented forms and movements. To fly with Nils, guided by Bjarne Thorup Thomsen, taught me to pay attention to horizontal and vertical axes, orientation and mobility, centrifugal and centripetal movements.

The centrifugal and the centripetal in Bjarne's work may pertain to the novel's outlook on the world, as seen in an article on the topography in another of Lagerlöf's novels, *Jerusalem* (1901–02), or to forces that distinguish the representation of the nation.¹ As he noted in yet another illuminating article, *Nils Holgersson* and *Jerusalem* are both 'governed by a tension between what might be termed centrifugal and centripetal

1. On the centrifugal novel, see Thorup Thomsen 2005; 2021b.

forces, between fragmentation of place and cohesion of place'.² In *Lagerlöfs litterære landvinding*, Bjarne stresses how centripetal and centrifugal movements structure the literary text simultaneously. The representation of Stockholm as the home of the entire nation in *Nils Holgersson* works through a coordination of centripetal and centrifugal forces, while homecoming in a later sketch is characterised by a contradictory logic: '*Selv de centrifugale kræfter får en centripetal funktion*.'³ ('Even the centrifugal forces acquire a centripetal function.') That helped me to spot the simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal forces in the Swedish novels of the 1840s that preceded Lagerlöf's quest to map the nation. Contrary to the use of nature in the novels of the 1830s, the landscape in several of the popular novels of the 1840s was part of a nationalist cartographic enterprise. However, the logic of Romantic nationalism simultaneously pulled the different provinces together into unity and split them apart.⁴

Bjarne's exploration of territorialities has also encouraged me to watch out for coordinates in vertical and horizontal directions. *Nils Holgersson's* 'horizontal up-down or north-south axis', Bjarne writes, 'is supplemented by a vertical top-down axis'.⁵ These axes may refer to the narrative's direction or to the gaze in the narrative, but they may also refer to nationalist ideas being vertically earth-bound or horizontally community oriented, or to sacral versus earthly representations of the landscape.⁶

2. Thorup Thomsen 1998: 131.

3. Thorup Thomsen 2007: 80, 95.

4. Bohlin 2016: 69. This article was published within the research project 'Enchanting Nations: Commodity Market, Folklore, and Nationalism in Scandinavian Literature 1830–1850'. The application was supported by Bjarne Thorup Thomsen and the project subsequently financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2016–18.

5. Thorup Thomsen 1998: 136.

6. See e.g. Thorup Thomsen 2007: 22, 81.

Bjarne states that ‘the vertical axis of landscape is a treasured dimension [...] in [...] both *Jerusalem* and *Nils Holgersson*, but in varying forms’.⁷ One way in which they differ is the perspective: in *Jerusalem*, ‘a spiritually loaded topography’, a ‘vertical openness’, is perceived from the ground, while Nils Holgersson looks down on a transcendent earth with a bird’s-eye view.⁸ These are indeed directions worth tracking back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and the inception of Romantic nationalism. Those flying lessons with Nils and Bjarne Thorup Thomsen will continue to inform my investigations of what he calls ‘a dialogic notion of nationhood and an awareness of the contingent nature of nation space’.⁹ His kindness gave my research project wings, both in terms of theoretical inspiration and in terms of support for the application that secured the project’s finances. I am immensely grateful.

Bibliography

- Bohlin, Anna. 2016. ‘Den svenska 1840-talsromanen som nationell kartografi’. *Samlaren* 137, 58–86.
- Thorup Thomsen, Bjarne. 1998. ‘Terra (In)cognita: Reflections on the search for the sacred place in Selma Lagerlöf’s *Jerusalem* and Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige’. In Louise Vinge (ed.), *Selma Lagerlöf Seen from Abroad*. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 131–141.
- . 2005. ‘Om topografin i Selma Lagerlöf *Jerusalem*, del I.’ L. Vinge (trans.). In M. Karlsson and L. Vinge (eds), *I Selma Lagerlöfs värld. Lagerlöfstudier*. Stockholm: Symposion & Selma Lagerlöfsällskapet, 166–181.

7. Thorup Thomsen 1998: 139.

8. Ibid.; (‘en andligt laddad topografi’, ‘den vertikala öppnhet’ author’s trans.), Thorup Thomsen 2005: 177.

9. Thorup Thomsen 2021a: 90–91.

- . 2007. *Lagerlöfs litterære landvinding: Nation, mobilitet og modernitet i Nils Holgersson og tilgrænsende tekster*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Contributions to Scandinavian Studies.
- . 2021a [2007]. 'Nordic National Borderlands in Selma Lagerlöf'. In Bjarne Thorup Thomsen (ed.), *Centring on the Peripheries: Studies in Scandinavian, Scottish, Gaelic and Greenlandic Literature*. London: Norvik Press, 79–93.
- . 2021b. 'Outreach, Invasion, Displacement: Denmark's Disputed Southern Borderland as Negotiated through Strategic and Affective Aspects of Space in Novels by Andersen and Bang'. In A. Bohlin et al. (eds), *Nineteenth-Century Nationalisms and Emotions in the Baltic Sea Region: The Production of Loss*. Leiden: Brill, 164–191.