Nils Holgersson, Empty Maps and the Entangled Bird’s-Eye View of Sweden

Abstract

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The notion of ecology—the interdependency of organisms on each other and their surroundings—was an outgrowth of Darwinism and was first articulated as such during the last years of the nineteenth century. Its appearance accompanied a fundamental shift in how the natural world was conceptualized, with implications that reached far beyond narrow scientific definitions or disciplinary boundaries. Particularly clear evidence of the pervasiveness of this ecological imaginary outside the scientific community can be found in the publication history and text of Selma Lagerlöf’s Nils Holgersson’s underbara resa genom Sverige. At the core of this early twentieth-century geography reader is a unique two-tiered narrative perspective that balances a detached, objective, cartographic overview with an embedded and subjective perspective as the protagonist, Nils, makes his way from Skåne to Lapland and back riding on a goose. This bifurcated view was, on the one hand, a creative balancing of pedagogical expectations and Lagerlöf’s own self-imposed aesthetic standards, but on the other, also a response to what the author saw as key epistemological concerns. Making liberal use of imagination and fantasy to enact an ecological position, Lagerlöf argues for a biocentric view of the natural environment and creates for her protagonist (and readers) an embodied, contextualized, ecological view of the Swedish nation.

Keywords

Nils Holgersson’s underbara resa genom Sverige – Selma Lagerlöf – ecology – environmentalism – embodiment

In May 1907, Uppsala University held a Linnéfest commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of the birth of Carl Linnaeus. The celebration was the grand culmination of the revived interest in the eighteenth-century naturalist and indicative of the cultural turn to indigenous nature in Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century. Among the numerous luminaries awarded with honorary degrees from the university at these celebrations were: Ernst Haeckel, a renowned German Darwinist and early proponent of an explicitly ecological approach to biological studies; Gustaf Kolthoff, a natural history museum curator who pioneered the use of diorama displays; and, somewhat controversially, Selma Lagerlöf. While these three figures
had little to do with each other professionally, their presence together at the ceremony honoring Linnaeus in Uppsala suggests an ecological imaginary linking all of their work, as well as Swedish culture more generally, in the early years of the twentieth century.

Of the three, Ernst Haeckel had, at that time, the greatest international reputation. He was, in fact, the first to coin the word *Oecologie* (*ecology*) in 1866 and, although the term itself took several decades to come into widespread use, his work fostered a more holistic study of the natural world than was common in the laboratory-based research of most nineteenth-century scientists. Rather than focus only on structural differences and the study of organisms in isolation, Haeckel urged the sciences to consider the economy of nature or, in other words, the relationship between organisms and their environments. According to Haeckel, morphology was, after all, the result of the complex interrelationships between organisms and their surroundings. Even the most basic characteristics of all plants and animals bore the negative imprint of their environments.

The work of Haeckel and the ecologists who came after him was controversial, because this focus on organisms’ embedded relationships questioned the established conception of nature as a collection of discrete and unchanging entities. By starting to re-conceive nature ecologically, ecologists rebuffed scientific norms and invited a redefinition of species delimitations, scientific institutions, disciplines and, implicitly, also the primacy of human perspective along with the established presumptions supporting it. The acceptance of ecology was by no means universal by 1907, but ecological ideas had begun to move into mainstream scientific thought at least to the extent that Haeckel could be celebrated at the *Linnéfest* ceremonies as one of the most distinguished naturalists of his day.

But as the selection of honoured guests at the *Linnéfest* suggests, Haeckel was hardly alone in re-imagining the natural world with ecological models. Gustaf Kolthoff too seems to have been working with similar ecological concepts in his work as the curator for a natural history museum. Although he never specifically referred to his work as being either Darwinian or “ecological”, he designed diorama displays that attempted to represent the interrelationships between animals and their environment by displaying preserved specimens in recreations of their native habitats. His argument for this new type of contextualized natural history display was that one could not truly understand an organism without also understanding its natural environment. In his *Biologiska museet* (1893) in Stockholm, a spectator could survey a 360-degree diorama displaying animals within typical landscapes from all over Scandinavia from a two-tiered observation deck. Every specimen appeared within a broader representation of its environmental context and within a suggested relationship to all of the other surrounding artefacts.

Although it was perhaps centred in scientific practice and models, ecological discourse was not at all limited to the study of natural science; it extended out into much wider circles of cultural production as well. As an author of prose fiction, Selma Lagerlöf’s associations with naturalists such as Kolthoff and Haeckel at the *Linnéfest* seemed out of place to a few outspoken critics who questioned the university’s judgment in recognizing Lagerlöf in this way. The honours bestowed upon Lagerlöf at this celebration were certainly not because of any empirical scientific research on her part, and yet this is exactly what is striking about the symmetry of the work of these particular figures. Even though her contributions were not to the development of the study of natural science per se, Lagerlöf’s fiction, and *Nils Holgersson* in particular, nevertheless participates in the emergence of ecology’s wider cultural discourse. Not only is her work at times marked with a distinctive
environmental bent, it also actively explores the issues and problems associated with the finitude of anthropocentric perspectives, the embeddedness of human and non-human organisms in their environments, the interrelatedness of organisms and environments, and the weak ontological distinctions between subjects and objects. Although some of these impulses can be detected in many of her writings, her 1906–07 novel, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige*, is particularly interesting as both formally and thematically it explores some of the key implications of an ecological imaginary.

### Entangled Views

Lagerlöf scholars such as Gunnar Ahlström, Bente Hinan and Vivi Edström among others have outlined how *Nils Holgersson* was a response to the pedagogical debates of the turn of the century. While this is certainly true, it is also important to note the connections between these debates and some of the philosophical underpinnings of the emerging ecological imaginary taking hold at the same time. The use of *Folkskolans läsebok* (1868) in elementary schools was a particularly controversial issue, especially after an influential article by Ellen Key was published in *Ord och bild* in 1898. This outdated geography and history reader was based on an encyclopaedic principle in which breadth was privileged over cohesiveness and, by the turn of the century, its sterile tone and perspective was considered by many to be antiquated. In her article, Ellen Key referred to the reader as “en nationalolycka” (1898: 138), claiming that it imparted knowledge “icke som näring utan som medicin i tunna, glatta, runda, färglösa, smaklösa oblatkapslar. Av det personliga, konkreta, levande, målande, talande, som barnen älska, finnes foga” (ibid., p. 137). The encyclopaedic dispassion of the old reader, its lack of imagination and its disregard for context—perhaps once considered its strengths—had by century’s end become its weaknesses. In 1901, Alfred Dalin approached Valborg Olander, Selma Lagerlöf’s close personal friend and secretary, on behalf of Sveriges allmänna folkskolläreförening about the possibility of commissioning a new geography reader from Lagerlöf, who was herself a former school teacher and already a recognized author with a reputation of bringing folk culture and the unique natural Swedish landscape to life.

Dalin’s original suggestion was for the book to have a mosaic-like structure, including a mixture of shorter stories, epic poems, excerpts from material Lagerlöf had already written and literary depictions (*skildringar*) of the landscape. Of these literary sketches, Dalin suggested that a few might have some type of fictional narrative frame (Ahlström 1942: 38). This type of patchwork, abstract organization with no overarching narrative principle betrays the persistence of a perspective tied to an encyclopaedic ideal of knowledge that was concentrated on the individual elements and pieces of information existing seemingly independently of each other. This approach to the work, of course, would have the advantage of making it easier for Dalin and his committee to give Lagerlöf a list of topics that could be covered systematically in the book and elements could easily be added or removed later as they would all stand as discrete, isolated entities. This organizational logic presumes an independence of knowledge and an objective, disembodied observer standing at a distance from the topic of study with more concern for the abstract ordering of discrete, interchangeable parts than for questioning the relationships of the parts to each other and to the observer. Dalin’s proposal held closely to the notion that a children’s geography reader must first have some claim to completeness in accounting for the idealized transcendent mapping of national borders. But from the beginning, this is not what Lagerlöf had in mind.
Dalin’s proposed organization made of disparate parts that refused to situate an embodied perspective was simply not acceptable to Lagerlöf, and for a long time this question of organization and overall structure was of real concern to her faith in the viability of the project. The problem was not just an aesthetic question for Lagerlöf but also an epistemological one. She clearly recognized the need for the book—as a geography reader—to have some sort of claim to an accurate overview and survey, but she was troubled with how this could be done without the book becoming so abstracted that it ceased to be relevant and engaging for its intended juvenile audience. In letters to Dalin, she articulates her concern that she might perpetuate the lifelessness of abstract and empty structures by failing to fuse together isolated elements into a cohesive whole. Many scholars have read these comments as an aesthetic and/or pedagogic choice, which certainly it is, but Lagerlöf also feared that by failing to bind together disparate elements she would also fundamentally misrepresent reality by making places and information seem dead, abstract, and lifeless for her readers. Like Key, Lagerlöf believed in fantasy and imagination to present these topics in a suitable way for a younger audience, but Lagerlöf’s creativity seems consistent also with a highly developed sense for cohesion and context as an important part of understanding the world.

Lagerlöf expressed her concerns to Dalin in a letter late in 1901. Speaking of the old reader (with perhaps a veiled reference to Dalin’s own suggestions), she wrote, “en sådan där läsebok, där allt möjligt är sammanblandadt, är ett fullkomligt oting, något som alls ej borde vara. Den meddelar ingen kunskap åt barnen, åtminstone ingen ordnad och klar… då man vill, att allt skall finnas i en bok, så kan man ju egentligen taga med allt möjligt och urvalet blir beröende på ren slump” (1967: 1: 250–51). Lagerlöf resisted the abstract, de-contextualized organization of the old reader as what, in her view, made the old reader seem arbitrary and lifeless to students. Relevance and a compelling organization were essential to making the material understandable for children as was reaching out to children’s sense of fantasy and imagination. This type of work could not be guided by an abstract, encyclopaedic principle, but rather by an organic, holistic approach that seems to be, at the very least, an indirect extension of ecological ideas that were just beginning to be articulated by contemporary scientists.

The challenge in writing a new geography reader for elementary aged children, as Lagerlöf saw it, was to make the abstract overview of a nation come alive and to infuse the potentially empty, meaningless construct with interest and relevance. Lagerlöf wrote to Dalin:


Thus, Selma Lagerlöf embarked upon writing *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* with both the idea of a system or a map (indeed the very project was built upon the abstract notion of a map of the nation) but also an awareness of the insufficiencies of maps and mapping. The map with its transcendent perspective could represent at a certain level, but its representation lacked important correspondences to lived experience on the ground. In ecological terms, the traditional overview map is always a misrepresentation of a given area, as it fails to represent the interrelatedness of organisms and environments. As Nils was to say of his famous cartographic view from the back of the goose, “ingenting var sig riktigt likt, när man såg det så där uppifrån” (Lagerlöf 1907: 1: 31).

The disembodied, objective view of Sweden on the map, or the systematic description of its
geography, culture, animal life, etc., does not always correspond well with the actual experience and relationships of humans with their environments and the landscape. The transcendent cartographic or systematic view of the nation necessarily privileges certain aspects and characteristics of the geography at the expense of others while simultaneously naturalizing the validity of its own construction. It is precisely the map’s disassociation with what it claims to fully represent—its critical distance—that gives it authority, but also might make it seem fixed, static, and, to quote Lagerlöf, “intetsägande”. Lagerlöf’s desire to give life to the map is an attempt to revivify the representation by rediscovering through narrative the context, correspondences and connections lost by presuming an objective, disembodied view. Furthermore, as has been argued by Bjarne Thorup Tømsen, the living map she strives for would—at least on the surface—naturalize the idea of the nation by presenting the assemblage of disparate parts as an organic whole.8

Her dissatisfaction with the empty or meaningless map and Dalin’s suggestions eventually led Lagerlöf to the now famous narrative device which transformed the mischievous young farm boy from Southern Sweden, Nils Holgersson, into a Liliputian who is given a bird’s-eye view or a survey of Sweden from the back of a goose migrating from Skåne all the way to Lapland and back again. By locating this perspective so specifically in the eyes of a human boy flying over the landscape, the abstract cartographic perspective is evoked but then countered repeatedly with the limitations of Nils’s own tiny embodiment and bounded perspective. This limitation placed on Nils’s vision does not allow the cartographic view to overwhelm the content of the book, as the view from the back of the goose is countered in each section by another view which is localized, grounded and contextualized by the literary depictions of the landscape as well as the overarching narrative structure. For Thomsen, this limitation on perspective is important for the model of the nation Lagerlöf is presenting which connects the local with the national, but the embodiment of vision is also key for how the work constructs the idea of the nation based on an ecological imaginary where disparate elements are interrelated and ontologically dependent on each other.

In maintaining a balance between an overview survey and a limited, embodied view, Lagerlöf chose not to entrust the entire narrative to an omniscient and absent narrative perspective. Instead, the third-person narrator focalizes most of the narrative through Nils’s perspective; this is true even if it is a re-telling of a story that Nils heard from another source.9 The narrator’s limited perspective and focalization through Nils is not justified until relatively late, Chapter 49, in a section entitled “En liten herrgård”. In this chapter, Nils finds himself on a small estate by the name of Mårbacka in Värmland—Lagerlöf’s own childhood home, of course—as the geese work their way back south. In the middle of this chapter the narrator begins a lengthy aside by saying: “Nu får jag tala om hur märkvärdigt det föll sig, att just det året, då Nils Holgersson för omkring med vildgässen, var det en människa, som gick och tänkte på att skriva en bok om Sverige, som skulle passa för barn att läsa i skolorna” (Lagerlöf 1907: 2: 413). The narrator’s singular use of the first-person pronoun draws special attention to this passage and to the identities of the narrator, this fictional author and Lagerlöf herself. We are told that the author had been greatly troubled by writing a book about Sweden which “måste vara lärorik och allvarlig, och där det inte får finnas ett osant ord” (ibid., p. 413). In the hope of receiving inspiration she travelled back to her childhood home and there happens to rescue Nils from the clutches of an owl. A most grateful Nils, who normally avoids other humans while in his reduced state, speaks with her at length and relates to her all of his adventures.
with the geese. The reader is then told that "hon, som hörde honom, blev alltmer häpen, förundrad och glad, allt som berättelsen fortgick. 'Nej, det var då en lycka att råka en, som har rest på gåsrygg över hela Sverige!' tänkte hon. 'Just det, som han berättar, ska jag skriva i min bok ...'" (op. cit., p. 422).

Because of the way that this chapter sets itself up as the supposed source of the narrative, it is hardly surprising that many scholars have commented on it and made it a focal point of their reading of the novel. Erland Lagerroth, for example, reads the return to Lagerlöf’s Mårbacka as an important part of Nils’s bildung in that it anchors an image of Sweden in provincial life and most specifically in Värmland—the centre of Lagerlöf’s own view of the nation (Lagerroth 1958: 288). Likewise, Edström reads the idealized description of the life at Mårbacka as a return home for the author personally as well as a means of glorifying the idea of an ideal home, an important prerequisite for developing “den fosterländska andan” (2002: 354) for the young readers of the book. In Edström’s words, the episode draws attention to itself through its metafictive elements to provide “en model av anspräkslöshet och balans till det unga släktet” (Edström 2002: 354). 10 Thomsen places more emphasis on the metafictive elements and illustrates how the emphasis on perspective and subjectivity is part of the book’s project to wed visions of the local and the national by showing readers “sin egen region med andre øjne” (2007: 73).

Thomsen’s reading of this passage as a re-inscription of subjective vision not only makes sense for his argument about how the work constructs the Swedish nation out of disparate regions, but can also be extended to emphasize Lagerlöf’s insistent embodiment of vision and participation in an ecological imaginary. In Nils Holgersson, the narrative perspective is embedded within and interactive with the events of the stories themselves. This emphasis on perspectival entanglement and embodiment is what Erland Lagerroth once described as Lagerlöf’s portrayal of “subjektiva landskap” in Nils Holgersson (see Lagerroth 1949: 223–35). For Lagerroth, it was an aesthetic decision, but given the ecological turn in thinking about nature around the turn of the century, it should be viewed as a philosophical choice as well—one that recognizes the narrator’s (and readers’) participation in both artistic as well as environmental systems.

Although Nils is given supernatural mobility and heightened powers of perception through his metamorphosis, the ultimate thickness of Lagerlöf’s narrative perspective constantly re-inscribes Nils’s physical presence in the text. Even when he is soaring on the back of a goose, seeing things in the dead of the night, and talking with all manner of creatures, he nonetheless cannot disavow his own embodiment—bewitched though it may be—nor can he gain access to the clarity of unmediated, objective, disembodied vision. He is always, in a sense, grounded, located and in intimate contact with an environmental context and subject to the limitations of his physical body on his own ability to perceive. Nils and the narrative perspective he provides does not exist outside these networks surrounding and acting upon him and his organs of perception.

The third-person, subjective narrator restricting itself to Nils’s perspective maintains the balance in Lagerlöf’s project between the critical distance of an outsider and Nils’s own entangled view—a view that, even on the back of a goose high above the landscape, does not completely transcend its own immediate context and perspective. Having made this point, it should also be duly noted, however, that while the narrator’s voice is usually aligned with Nils’s perspective, there are nevertheless various moments when this is not the case. But even in these cases the narrator’s voice maintains the same essential texture in that the perspective is
still not allowed to absolutely transcend localization by lapsing into omniscience.

An early example of this temporary shift away from narrative focalization through Nils comes at the beginning of chapter 3, “Vildaftågelsliv”, when a sudden change of perspective temporarily disorients the reader who does not have enough insight to be able immediately to place the story within the frame narrative of Nils and the geese. In this passage, the narrative focalization suddenly shifts without explanation from Nils to a group of people living on or near an unnamed estate in Skåne. The section opens, “Just i de dagarna tilldrog sig i Skåne en händelse, som blev mycket omtalad och till och med kom i tidningarna men som många ha trott vara en dikt, därför att de inte varit i stånd att förklara den” (Lagerlöf 1907: 1: 51). The narrator seems to gather her information from this discussion among the residents and in the newpapers and, most particularly, focuses on the perspective of an older, female worker, “en gammal mor”, the only eye-witness to an unusual event involving a caged mother squirrel separated from her children and a tomte who comes to the squirrel family’s rescue. Only later does the reader come to understand that the tomte is, in fact, Nils.

The effect of the sudden shift in focalization is disorienting. As Valborg Olander points out in her commentary for teachers using Nils Holgersson, with this shift, Lagerlöf departs from a chronological organization with this chapter making it “inte lätt ens för vuxna, och ändå svårare [...] för barn, att fasthålla vilket som tilldrog sig först eller sist” (Olander 1918: 80), but the confusion seems intentional as Lagerlöf uses it effectively to build productive narrative tension. The reader is like the eye witness in the book who is caught searching for an explanation to a provocative mystery. The reader’s own narrative vision is obscured and limited just as it is when the narrator is focalizing through Nils’s limited perspective. Rather than drift into omniscience when not focalizing through Nils, the narrator contextualizes perspective first by focalizing through the collective discussion of the group and then more specifically through the old woman. The fundamental nature of the narrative perspective does not change. It merely shifts to another limited and embodied perspective.

Illustrations and Title

The difficulty of maintaining balance in the novel between the experience of the individual characters in specific settings and an abstracted overview required by the project’s parameters was further exemplified by two separate instances as the text was being prepared for publication. The first case had to do with the illustrations that were to accompany the book. After Bruno Liljefors backed out of an arrangement to do the illustrations for the first edition, 24-year-old John Bauer was approached by the publisher and he submitted several illustrations for consideration. Lagerlöf was not at all pleased with his work. She complained in a letter to her publisher, Karl Otto Bonnier, in September 1906 that the illustrations Bauer had submitted were good in terms of their naturalistic depiction of animals, but fell hopelessly short of locating these subjects against a specific background. The illustrations’ “brist på bakgrund” (Lagerlöf 1967: 2:44, emphasis in the original) failed to balance the specific and the abstract; for Lagerlöf, the humans and animals depicted in Bauer’s drawings were not to be understood apart from the context in which they were acting. Background and setting were of fundamental importance. In its emphasis on environment and context, Nils Holgersson reverses any presumptions and conventions that might relegate the setting to the expendable role of an arbitrary, passive backdrop. Because this book was written as a geography reader, the setting is the focus of the story. While the actions of the
characters are undeniably important to the success of the narrative, if those actions were to become the absolute focus of the work, as Lagerlöf felt was the case in some of Bauer’s illustrations, the work would fail in its primary pedagogical function.

In contrast to Bauer’s illustrations is the work of the first illustrator considered for the project, Bruno Liljefors. Liljefors’s paintings were renowned for how they depicted animal subjects embedded in natural environments, sometimes to the degree that it is difficult to discern a specific focal point or even the animal subject’s outline against the background. Like Gustaf Kolthoff, Liljefors had fixed ideas about the importance of context and environment to the subjects he painted. Bauer’s approach with the focus on the subject is perhaps more closely linked with the tradition of scientific illustration that historically has diminished the organism’s entangled relationships with its environment for the sake of clarity.

Ultimately, only a couple of Bauer’s illustrations made it into the first edition of Nils Holgersson, and in each case they met Lagerlöf’s demand for a detailed setting. For illustrations in the rest of the first edition, Lagerlöf and her publisher decided mostly to rely upon photographs of specific architectural structures and panoramic shots of the landscape. The use of photographs is an interesting solution and it is provocative to wonder why this was not the first choice, given the documentary project behind the book’s origin. Certainly by 1907, the technology for printing photographs economically was well established and would have been recognized from the beginning as a viable option for the project. Lagerlöf’s own initial preference, however, was for “små enkla teckningar” (1967: 2: 43) somewhat “barnsliga och med litet dramatiskt lif i handlingarna, som de framställa” (ibid., 2: 43). Of course, one can only speculate why photographs were not the first choice, but it is conceivable that particularly panoramic photography, at least initially, seemed to go too far in its embrace of a detached view of the landscape and perhaps moving in the direction of Lagerlöf’s vision of the empty map.

In contrast, “childish” drawings would foreground the subjective perspective of the artist even while they depict a specific and localized scene. The subjective perspective of the text might seem to be challenged by the documentary and objective claims of the photographic medium and especially of landscape photographs taken at a distance. Additionally, while the photographs could represent the setting and landscape with detailed and indexical accuracy, this exactness would come at the expense of depicting the fictional action holding the story together. But unable to get the kinds of illustrations she had hoped for in time for the first printing, the photographic approach was ultimately preferable to Lagerlöf over Bauer’s omission of background and focus on the de-contextualized actors of the narrative.

A second issue highlighting the precarious balance in Nils Holgersson between the embodied view and a transcendent overview came in giving the book a title. Perhaps because she sensed significant discrepancies between her ideas and those of Dalin, Lagerlöf had demanded throughout the creative process that she have absolute independence in making decisions. She was concerned about artistic integrity and the results of a work written by the committee and thus she stipulated as part of the agreement to write the book that Dalin would have to “anför-tro utarbetandet af berättelserna och även plananläggningen, ämnesvalet, hela arbetet nära nog, åt mig ensam” (1967: 1: 253).

But shortly before the first part of the book was printed, the committee from the teachers’ association who had been helping with the proofreading began to strongly recommend that Lagerlöf adopt their working title for the book, “Boken om Sverige”. In contrast, the titles La-
gerlöf preferred were: “Nils Holgerssons underbara resa”, “Tummetotts resa över Sverige”, “Den underbara resan”, or “En färd över Sverige”. Generally speaking, Fridtjuv Berg and the committee were forward thinking and progressive in their pedagogical views, but even they were concerned that Lagerlöf’s suggestions sounded too fanciful, and, while perhaps her suggestions might have seemed proper for a children’s book in another context, they did not seem like titles appropriate for a classroom reader. Berg and the committee were clearly anxious about the relationship between the seemingly objective facts and the fanciful frame Lagerlöf had developed around them.

For Lagerlöf, this fictional frame was necessary in order to create a subjective viewpoint and to give the facts a fully developed context, background and grounding. For those on the committee, the fictional elements in the text were tolerable, but not something they were particularly enthusiastic about foregrounding. An incensed Lagerlöf wrote to her publisher in November 1906, “Jag får våga kuppen med skolråd etc. Det finns ingen titel som kan överskyla det förhållandet att boken är en fantasi-bok, att den också kan meddela åtskillig nyttig lärdom blir det anmälarenas sak att klargöra” (1967: 2: 50). The committee was ultimately willing to trust Lagerlöf’s judgment and backed down. Lagerlöf got to keep her title, but the row was only a foreboding of the reaction to the book when it finally came off the press a few weeks later.

**Fantasy, Fact and the Ecological Imaginary**

The reviews of the first part of *Nils Holgersson* were somewhat mixed, but in general it was well received, with particular praise for Lagerlöf’s talents as an artist and storyteller. A quite devastating review, however, was written by Professor Einar Lönnberg and published in *Stockholms Dagblad* on 22 May 1907, several months after the first volume appeared and just a day before the aforementioned ceremonies in Uppsala. Because of its timing, the review was interpreted not only as an attack on Lagerlöf’s work but also a critique of the university and its decision to reward her with an honorary doctorate. Lönnberg sharply criticized the book for numerous factual inaccuracies, particularly in the depiction of certain animals. While his list of errors does seem to get into minutia, his criticism does betray to a degree Lagerlöf’s own lack of contact with the natural world. Her extensive studies for the project, including travels particularly to Sweden’s northern provinces, are well documented, but ultimately these types of errors shed light on her own misreadings and separation from first-hand contact with the animals in question. Indeed, some of her geographic descriptions, particularly of Northern Sweden—the region with which she was least familiar—come across in the book as considerably more shallow and map-like than regions in the south.

Perhaps even more significant in Lönnberg’s rant against the work is his criticism of the book’s free mixture of fact and fiction, and in this respect he articulated what was a concern for quite a number of critics and a central issue in the on-going pedagogical debate referred to earlier. Lönnberg wrote:

> Använder man fantastiska tillägg, då man skall meddela en upplysning om faktiska förhållanden, t.o.m. i naturhistoria, då drages fantasien ned och förvandlas till osanning. Och därifrån bör man söka bevara sig själv och framför allt barnen. Barn ha ett känsligt sinne. Om de finna att en av deras läsebok handskas lättvindig med sanningen, kunna de lätt nog själv få en beklaglig ringaktning för sanningen, som sedan kan medföra olyckliga följd för framtiden. (1907)

Lönnberg’s review takes an extraordinarily polarized view of truth and fiction and has little patience for Lagerlöf’s attempts to reconsider
the factual makeup of the nation in a format she felt would be more alive and actual for young readers. His argument seems to limit strictly what is to be understood as fact to objective, unembellished, de-contextualized, systematic representations of the nation. While he is, of course, not going so far as to condemn the teaching of art and fiction in schools, he does not seem to recognize any cross-fertilization between fictional art and his conception of science nor the fundamentally imagined position assumed by an “objective” map. These presuppositions about the independence and objectivity of scientific data are, not surprisingly, strikingly similar to the presumed ontological independence and de-contextualized display of specimens in the Naturhistoriska riksmuseet under his curatorship. Both in the case of the museum and in Lönnberg’s critique there is no acknowledgment of the limitations of science’s presumed objective perspective and dependence on core assumptions that when closely inspected reveal themselves to be only provisional. Inherent within the presentation of scientific facts are the contingencies of collection, compilation, construction and contextualization, including the embodiment of the observer even if all of this is obscured or repressed by the claims of objectivity. Science and artistic creativity are more closely related than Lönnberg seems to be willing to acknowledge.17

With *Nils Holgersson*, Lagerlöf was not attempting to write a scientific treatise in the traditional sense, her approach to the question of truth was fundamentally different from that of Lönnberg. In a letter to Dalin reacting to Lönnberg’s criticism she writes:


Lagerlöf’s unapologetic attitude toward Lönnberg’s core criticism was not because she held a complete disregard for the pull and influence of traditional scientific methodology and evidence on her fiction. In fact, she drew quite heavily on systematically ordered reference works and maps in preparing to write the book; the work was, after all, commissioned with specific pedagogical goals in mind. She even suggested to Dalin at one point that a simple map might be inserted tracing the path of Nils’s journey through Sweden.18 At times her dependence on these sources makes itself overly pronounced, as in the aforementioned case of Norrland, but otherwise Lagerlöf’s writing is clearly motivated by her artistic and pedagogical impulses to re-contextualize and give a subjective perspective to objective facts. Nina Burton, who has made a similar argument, concludes that the mixture of fact and fiction is one of the many “double perspectives” in that book that animates the representation of the map, captures the reader’s imagination and engenders a love for Sweden—things that mere facts could never do on their own (Burton 2007: 26–29).

While her commitment to her fictional frame was unshakable, Lagerlöf did not let this impinge on her sense that she needed to make the content of the representation as accurate as possible. She took careful notice of Lönnberg’s criticism of her factual information and shortly after the ceremonies in Uppsala—and before the second part of *Nils Holgersson* had even come off the press—Lagerlöf contacted Gustaf Kolthoff to ask him to proofread the entire book and to use his expertise and knowledge about the animal world to correct any errors.19
Ideally, the book was meant to strike a balance between the constructed, embodied, subjective perspective that linked all of the various episodes and observations together with the objective, factual knowledge about Sweden. Reality was hardly reduced to a simple play of language for Lagerlöf and her use of a fictional frame narrative to create a vivid context was not because she lacked a commitment to factual accuracy. Despite all her preparations, however, as evidenced by the debate, the balance between objective fact and subjective fiction in Nils Holgersson was difficult to maintain and, at least for a few vocal critics, was ultimately unconvincing. But in the wake of the controversy Lönnberg’s review produced, Lagerlöf’s allies stood by her side in her effort to resist an overly positivistic objectification of the natural world in her children’s geography reader. Kolthoff helped to weed out many of the factual inaccuracies for the second part and for the next edition of the book fellow authors rallied to praise the work’s literary qualities; scientists—particularly biologists—made sure to heap outspoken praise upon Lagerlöf’s work at the Uppsala Linnéfest, and the audience gave a virtually unprecedented standing ovation as she received her honorary degree from the university.

By most accounts, Lagerlöf ultimately prevailed in the debate over her controversial new textbook. By the time the second part was published later on in 1907, the fierceness that had met the first part in 1906 had largely died down and the reception of the second volume was more universally warm. The debate over the novelty of the project had passed and the focus was instead on the excitement the book was generating in the classroom (Ahlström 1942: 84).

**Ecocritical Perspectives**

As Nils is about to take his leave of the geese who had been his travel partners on a journey twice over Sweden, Akka, the lead goose, says to him:

> Om du har lärt dig något gott hos oss, Tummetott, så kanske du inte tycker, att människorna bör vara ensamma på jorden [...]. Tänk på att ni har ett stort land och att ni nog kunde ha råd att lämna några nakna skär och några grevliga sjöar och några öde fjäll och avlägsna skogar åt oss fattiga djur, där vi finge vara i fred! I all min tid har jag varit jagad och förföljd. Det vore gott att veta, att det funnes en fristad också för en sådan som jag. (Lagerlöf 1907: 2: 475)

Akka’s challenge to Nils and to the readers of the book points to something missing thus far in this analysis of the ecological imaginary at work in Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige. Up to this point, I have been engaging ecology as an ontological model of interdependence between a viewing subject and that subject’s embeddedness within the environment he or she is observing. But in addition to this ecological imaginary in Nils Holgersson is the novel’s engagement, awareness and concern for the actual physical environment. Not only was the novel meant to introduce elementary school children to a national, imagined community, it also sought to raise readers’ awareness of their own involvement within a more all-encompassing ecological community corresponding roughly, although perhaps not precisely, with the territorial bounds of the Swedish nation.

An important part of filling the empty map of Sweden for Lagerlöf in the novel was to give nature a presence that was more than just a backdrop or framing device for the action; Nils Holgersson suggests that nature might indeed have a voice independent of human consciousness and history. To be sure, by today’s standards Lagerlöf’s narrative seems hardly radical, but in the context of her own time this work was nonetheless bold in imagining and validating environmental perspectives apart from human concerns. One must remember that until the twentieth century the ability to speak in
the post-mediaeval, Western world has almost always been reserved for humans alone. Thus, if concerns for the natural environment were to be taken seriously by her audience, Lagerlöf had to find a way to allow nature to speak. To make the case for the environment, she either had to show how proper care for the environment also benefited humans, or she needed to invite the revision of an anthropocentric worldview entirely. In *Nils Holgersson*, she did both.

Showing how care for the environment can benefit humans is essentially a utilitarian argument that can be made without needing to displace a privileged anthropocentric perspective. It is human self-interest, for instance, that seems at first blush to motivate scenes like the one witnessed by Nils in Gästrikland, where school children parade out into the woods to replant trees in an area burned by a wildfire. As the children walked, they cheered themselves thinking how planting trees would hold the soil on the mountain top and that soil on the mountain top would mean the return of the forest where they would again be able to pick berries where now there was only bare rock. Furthermore, “de små plantorna, som de satte, skulle ju så småningom bli till höga träd. Det skulle kanske komma att byggas stora hus eller granna skepp av dem” (Lagerlöf 1907: 2: 267). People from all over the parish were attracted by the children’s work and joined in:


Thinking of the berries they would pick, the houses and boats the lumber might build, and then linking the planting of the trees to the sowing of fields intended for harvest all have basic economic benefits for humans. The idea of planting the forest in order one day to be able to harvest it has echoes in other parts of the book, where logging in the North is specifically equated to farming in the South. Even replanting so as to be remembered favorably by coming generations is motivated by self- or, in the very least, anthropocentric interest.

But hidden within this passage is an additional dimension to the anthropocentric position that is developed to a greater extent in other sections in the book. The narrator points out how replanting will also “väcka insektsurr och trastsång och tjäderspel och allt slags liv på den ödsliga bergvidden”, and while all of these things might be understood as being for the aesthetic pleasure of humans they can also be read as expressing interest in the health of the environment and biological diversity with no direct benefit for humans.

This, of course, touches upon the second avenue available to Lagerlöf for promoting environmentalism. This argument was by far the more difficult one for her to make in that it required arguing for care of the environment purely for its own sake, but it is here that the work distinguishes itself. Making an argument for the environment without showing direct benefits for humans required Lagerlöf to devise a means whereby nature could be given a voice to counteract mere anthropocentrism. The natural environment needed to have a means of articulating itself in a manner comprehensible to human understanding but without making nature simply a mirror of human consciousness. Nils’s position at the threshold between the human and the non-human world was a crucial
narrative device for mediating these perspectives.

While it is true that many of the non-human voices in the novel are significantly anthropomorphized, Lagerlöf’s representations nevertheless resist becoming human thoughts in animal form. In 1906, Lagerlöf wrote in a letter to Dalin that her goal was to represent animals as much as possible on their own terms and to get away from a fablistic tradition where animals act and think like humans. Claiming to have taken her inspiration from Kipling, animals in *Nils Holgersson* are able to talk and seem quite clever by human standards, but otherwise they have their regular “djurvanor.” Lagerlöf wrote:

Jag har försökt att följa naturkunnighet och sanning så vidt som möjligt, så att läseboken skall bli en verklig skildring af djurlifvet i vårt land. Det blir med detta som med allt som meddelas i berättelseform att det blir en del olikt i själva händelsen, men undergrunden är riktig för så vidt som jag kunnat utforska den hos mina källor. (1967: 2: 37)

Despite the fact that the narrative form itself is inherently anthropomorphic, Lagerlöf takes a significant stride in presenting an alternative orientation in the novel by attempting to depict animals on their own terms and not only as they relate to or imitate humans.

In presenting animals as agents with the capacity for non-human thought, desire and volition, *Nils Holgersson* offers an alternative perspective that challenges the assumed primacy of the human gaze and the anthropocentric structuring of the natural world. As Nina Burton has written, by making the animals mirror the environment and not human habits, even young readers can gain the insight that “människan inte längre [är] alltings mått” (2007: 20–21). Based on these imagined animal perspectives (and it is significant that the perspective is plural), the novel hints at an alternative image of the landscape—one that does not take all of the anthropocentric assumptions about the definition and description of Sweden for granted. Of course, the consideration in *Nils Holgersson* of other non-human perspectives is admittedly rather paltry when compared to later-twentieth-century texts by environmentally engaged authors. Lagerlöf’s animals still seem strikingly human and considerably aware of human action. But, nevertheless, the effort to engage these ideas shows an interest in questioning the absolute primacy and adequacy of the human perspective in colonizing the natural environment.

This alternative perspective displaces centred human vision, although it most certainly does not replace it. An example of how these perspectives play off against each other is found particularly in the naming of place. Lagerlöf’s animals seem, at least occasionally, to be aware of human names for places despite the fact that we are told most do not understand human language. But on occasion they, quite significantly, also provide their own names for places—an incredibly provocative choice for a book aspiring to be a geography primer! Having never travelled himself, Nils could not plausibly have recognized all the features he flies over and the reader depends on the narrator to mediate the naming of the landscape in order to connect Nils’s perspective with the established human map of Sweden. While these alternative mappings of space from various non-human points of view are never as fully developed as the map constructed by the narrator’s anthropocentric perspective, they suggest multiple ways in which the map of Sweden might be drawn with each one highlighting different relationships and features of the same geographic region.

An example of how each of these perspectives map Sweden differently is seen in the treatment of space. Stockholm, for instance, occupies a privileged central position from a human perspective as Sweden’s capital and largest city. The anthropocentric primacy of Stockholm is underscored in the novel in a speech praising Stockholm given by an incognito King
Oscar II to Klement, a homesick peasant from Hälsingland. Standing together in Skansen in Stockholm, the king, himself an embodiment of the state, describes Stockholm as “inte en stad för sig ... [men] en stad för hela riket” (Lagerlöf 1907: 2: 239). Stockholm, he says, is “landets medelpunkt” (2: 239) and “Härifrån komma något till alla svenskar, och här ha alla svenskar något att beställa. Här behöver ingen känna sig främmande och längta hem. Här äro alla svenskar hemma” (2: 240). The king concludes by having Klement consider “allt som har samlats hit till Stockholm” (2: 240) from all over Sweden. In this, he is referring specifically to the houses and artefacts at Skansen, but might just as well be referring to Kolthoff’s Biological Museum, the Nordiska Museet, the Royal Library, or any number of government agencies that also had similar goals of gathering into one place the evidences and traces defining and controlling the territory and nation of Sweden—another means of mapping the nation and creating a bird’s-eye view.

In contrast to the importance ascribed by an anthropocentric perspective to Stockholm is a certain unnamed mountain valley in Norrland, the goal of the geese’s vernal migration. For the geese, this place is far more significant than the city described by the king and, in fact, we do not have an account of the geese visiting Stockholm at all. The lack of a specific name for the valley resists the appropriation and colonizing tendency of the human gaze. The power to name and map space is also the power to control that space, and this space belongs to the geese.

This perspectival shift away from anthropocentric vision implicitly questions the hierarchy justifying human domination and is again echoed in Nils’s reaction to seeing the vast territories of Northern Sweden as he started with the geese on their autumnal journey south. Nils considered how:

The inclusion of the Lapps (Sámi) in this list of alternative animal perspectives is indeed unfortunate, but also very telling as it exemplifies the colonialist and racist implications of mapping from a single perspective. Each human and non-human inhabitant experiences geography differently and although the reader of Nils Holgersson is only given hints as to what might be the orienting features on these alternative maps, these intimations challenge an absolute, definitive perspective of the landscape.

Another particularly striking example of the novel’s embrace of non-human perspectives is given in an episode revolving around the de facto bird sanctuary of Tåkern, a shallow lake in central Sweden. At the time Nils Holgersson was written, there was an on-going debate about the future of this lake in south-central Sweden that was coveted by some as potentially valuable farmland. Parts of the lake had already been drained by the time Lagerlöf was writing but only with varying degrees of profitability. In the novel, the reader is told the lake has been scheduled to be drained completely to create more farm land. A young mother goes down to the shores of Tåkern shortly before the scheduled draining in a state of despair fearing that her youngest child has just drowned in the lake, and as she ponders the significance of her own loss she senses that the birds on the lake seem to be following her and mourning and lamenting as well. “De måtte visst ha en sorg, eftersom de jämtrar sig så,’ tänkte hon. Men så kom hon ihåg sig. De var ju bara fåglar, som hon hörde klas. De hade väl inga bekymmer” (Lagerlöf
1907: 1: 250). But the commotion among the birds did not die down even after sunset. In the meantime, her own sorrow had weighed upon her even more until:


Hon blevstående och grubblade på detta. Det syntes vara ett gott och behagligt verk att förvandla en sjö till åker och äng, men det finge väl vara en annan sjö än Tåkern, en annan sjö, som inte var hem för så många tusental av djur. (Lagerlöf 1907: 1: 251)

Unlike Goethe’s Faust, who likewise confronted a point of opposition while involved in a land reclamation project, the mother decides the cost of the project to be too great, not for humans, but for the birds and other creatures making the lake their home. Fearing that her son’s death might be a sign of the injustice of depriving thousands of creatures of their home for the economic benefit of a few human families, she returns to her house to convince her husband—the most outspoken of the advocates for draining the lake—that the lake should be left, literally, for the birds. No sooner has she confronted her husband than her son is rescued by Nils and found by the shore of the lake.

This episode involving the preservation of Tåkern is additionally significant in that the alternative perspective it posits also points to another important discursive context overlapping with the ecological perspective outlined by this study, namely turn-of-the-century feminism. Lagerlöf was not just interested in making a case for the respect of the environment, but even more pressingly in securing a voice and equal standing for women in society. The fact that it is a woman who first understands the importance of saving the lake and the underlying implication that this biocentric action has moral and ethical implications for the community is clearly in line with Lagerlöf’s views of women as the savours of civilization articulated elsewhere, such as in her famous address “Hem och stat” delivered at the international women’s suffrage congress in Stockholm in 1915. The proto-environmental discourse at play in Nils Holgersson is, of course, part of the broader discursive fabric of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Swedish culture interested alternative perspectives and polysemous aesthetics.

Granting legitimacy and weight to such alternative views and voices poses a challenge to a single, centralized perspective. Each of the multiple perspectives cast the landscape in a different light and the inconsistencies between variant perspectives create ambiguity and space for interpretive fantasy and play. The individual reader cannot ultimately escape any more than Nils can from a limited perspective, but the presentation of multiple perspectives in the narrative is a reminder of other possible configurations and definitions. The hegemony of a fixed, omniscient, anthropocentric perspective is shaken.

Interest in human action is by no means lost in Nils Holgersson. Nils’s perspective on his adventures is, after all, the narrative structure holding the work together, but the point is that this view is very consistently contextualized. Nils’s maturation on the trip is a significant part of the story and part of this is his own recognition of his connectedness to and dependencies on all the environments he encounters. While the imagined national community is, at its core, perhaps a linguistic construction, this broader ecological community to which Lagerlöf has introduced her readers seems to have even more fundamental ontological claims and blurred dis-
tinations between subjects, objects and environments.

This is not to say that Lagerlöf jettisons non-ecological categories for a more ecologically grounded identity, rather she uses human involvement in this ecological community as a means of intertwining the definition of identity and natural landscape. The imagined national community gets mapped onto the ecological community as human history and identity are implicated in natural processes and history. The subjective perspectivalism of humans and non-humans posits new possibilities for how the relationships between the viewing subject and the environment—especially the natural environment—might be conceived. A detached, objective bird’s-eye view is contrasted by the perspective of a subject that is at one and the same time an observer and an actor entangled in the landscape. This actor can no longer view his environment objectively but must confront the complex interrelatedness between the observer and what is observed.

Lagerlöf’s nationalism involved a very fundamental engagement with the natural environment. The environmentalist tone in the novel comes as part of the recognition that the act of observing and interpreting affects not only how the landscape it treated, but also the observer. The world is not just geological features and organisms that can be measured by an objective, anthropocentric human standard and put in tables and charts, but entities whose definition exceeds these attempts at quantification. But nor is the relationship between Lagerlöf’s texts and the natural environment based on an abstract notion of mimesis. Rather than acting as a copy leading away from the natural world, *Nils Holgersson* takes an active stance in moulding a view of geography leading back to the natural environment. The work strives to affect how the young Swedish readers would see themselves both socially and geographically as part of the Swedish nation and also as being embedded in a series of networks with their physical environment. While Lagerlöf’s work did not necessarily have a direct influence on scientists of her own generation, the work unquestionably had a significant impact on how the next generation of school children constructed their place in the space of the nation as well as within the natural environment, thus significantly shaping the kinds of questions they would ask of science when they came of age.

In 1958, Harry Martinson wrote a tribute to Selma Lagerlöf and *Nils Holgersson underbara resa genom Sverige* in the form of a poem entitled “Vildgäsresan”. In reference to Lagerlöf he wrote:

Hon var den anspråkslöse lärarinnan
som tog oss med på långfärd i en tid
då världens gräns på jorden sammanföll
med sockengränser och där varje by
satt fängen i sig själv bak elva stättor
och femton landsvägsgrindar eller vändkors.
En milsjögranskog stangde runt omkring
Då kom hon med sin vildgäsblog till byn

Lagerlöf’s success in drawing and filling the empty map of Sweden has been attested by the enormous significance the book had, and continues to have, on the imagination of its readers. As Martinson suggests, the book invited its readers to consider an image of their homeland larger than their own parish, but without losing the sense of connectedness associated with home. Nils was “piloten i vår första flygdröm” soaring over the landscape, pulling and collecting the nation together, but with such artistic imagination as to fill the empty and lifeless systematic representation of the map with interconnections, vitality and life.

Although the action in *Nils Holgersson* never leaves Swedish territory, the project involves a double movement of both overstepping and establishing boundaries. Lagerlöf uses the tension between oversight and entangled view to probe
the limits of traditional local identities and territorial definitions and then through creative narrative structures weaves them together to form a patchwork whole. While on the one hand the nationalistic project behind the book invites a distanced objective perspective that can read a certain naturalness to the construct of a nation, on the other the book also pushes for a radical reassessment of the place of humans within that construct and for a narrative perspective entangled in what it seeks to describe. It was not only the boundary between the parish and the nation that Lagerlöf invited her readers to cross, but also the more fundamental boundary separating humans from their own environment.

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Notes

1 In Nature’s Economy, Daniel Worster outlines the work of Haeckel and other important early ecologists including Danish scientist Eugenius Warming, who, not surprisingly, was also at the 1907 Linnéfests (Worster 1994: 191–204). Haeckel’s contributions to ecology as a modern discipline, however, are not without some controversy. He tended to be a good interpreter of Darwin but con-
sensitive in areas such as in his opposition to the use of quantitative studies (see Stauffer 1957: 138–44).

2 For more on the history of Darwinism in Sweden, see Ulf Danielsson’s two-part article, "Darwinismens inträngande i Sverige" (1963–64 and 1965–66).

3 The significance of this two-tiered display strategy in the context of ecological studies will be made more apparent with the exploration below of a similar visual dynamic deployed in Nils Holgersson underbara resa genom Sverige. Despite the fact that Lagerlöf and Kolthoff were acquainted, there is no evidence suggesting there is a direct link between the museum and the novel.

4 Einar Lönngberg was one of the most vocal critics of Lagerlöf’s project, and intentionally timed the publication of a scathing review of Nils Holgersson underbara resa genom Sverige to coincide with the ceremonies at Uppsala (see StD 22 May 1907). For more about Lönngberg’s criticism, see the discussion below.


6 Lagerlöf wrote to Key late in 1906, after the first part of Nils Holgersson was ready, crediting Key’s article specifically for opening her eyes to the inadequacy of the old reader and sowing the seeds for what eventually would become Nils Holgersson (see Lagerlöf 1967: 2: 51).

7 The young Fredrik Böök was among the first to focus on the aesthetic dimension of Lagerlöf’s choices, and his influential review in Svenska Dagbladet (18 Dec. 1907) undoubtedly helped to focus much of the later research on Nils Holgersson in that direction. For more of a discussion on Böök’s review, see Nordlund (2005: 101). Ahlström gives one of the fullest accounts of how Lagerlöf uses her art to work towards pedagogical ends in his chapter "Skollärob och dikter" in Ahlström (1943: 221–9).

8 Björn Thorup Thomsen presents a convincing reading of how Nils Holgersson is very consciously constructing Swedish nationality by stitching together what might otherwise be seen as fragmented views of the nation. The metaphor of the map is powerful in linking all of the parts together into a whole. See, particularly, his chapter "Relative landskaber" in Thomsen (2007: 69–101).

9 The term focalization was first coined by Gerard Genette and is used here, deliberately, in the words of Mieke Bal, "to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision" (1997: 143).

10 Torbjörn Althén even reads this chapter’s description of cooperative work and self-sufficiency as an articulation of the ideals of the folkhem that would later emerge in Sweden (Althén 1983: 32).

11 For a short overview of the early illustration history of Nils Holgersson, see Andersson (1999).

12 Liljefors, it should be noted, was a close friend of Gustaf Kolthoff and a collaborator with Kolthoff on the Biologiska museet in Stockholm, among other projects.

13 Although Liljefors declined the commission to do the illustrations for Nils Holgersson, some of his artwork did find its way into the first edition. Because they were not done with the work in mind, these illustrations did not depict any particular action of the narrative but were far more general in presenting examples of animals mentioned by the text represented in their natural environments.

14 A comprehensive study of the history of illustrations in the various editions and translations of Nils Holgersson would provide a telling window on the reception of the novel in different communities. Whereas for an early-twentieth-century Swedish audience the relationship of the story to the landscape is of utmost importance, for a foreign audience this has traditionally been of secondary concern to the narrative action. Hence, especially for the earlier Swedish editions, a focus of the illustrations is placed on the landscape (as evidenced by the use of photography in the first edition), whereas for foreign editions illustrations tend to be focused more on the principal characters and actions. A non-comprehensive selection of illustrations from different versions and translations of Nils Holgersson can be found throughout Edström (1996).

15 Ahlström provides an overview of the reception of Nils Holgersson in his chapter "Mottagandet" in Ahlström (1942: 70–84). Anna Nordlund also provides an excellent summary of the book’s reception, particularly in the context of the pedagogical debates and discussions of social reform at the time in Nordlund (2005: 96–102). In Nordlund, one will also find an exhaustive list of the reviews of both parts of Nils Holgersson published in Sweden (443–6).


17 For a more prolonged discussion of the relationship between natural scientists and fiction in Anglo-American literature more generally, see the George Levine monograph on the subject (1988).

18 Lagerlöf (1967: 2: 54).

19 See Lagerlöf (1967: 2: 61–3).

20 For an excellent introduction to the history of the subjection of nature, see Lynn White’s classic essay first published in 1967, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” (White 1996: 3–14). More recently, Christopher...
Manes in “Nature and Silence” has expanded White’s argument, claiming that the powerful institutional technologies of literacy and Christian exegesis caused nature to grow silent in Western discourse “shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object” (1996: 17).

See, for example, Chapter 41, “I Medelpad” about the logging industry and where Gorgo, the eagle, says to Nils, “Häroppe har de skogen till åker” (2: 287).

21 See, for example, Lagerlöf (1907: 1: 30–1).
22 Along these same lines, Elenius compares Lagerlöf’s representation of the Sámi with that of her representation of the geese (Elenius 2001: 34–5).
23 For an excellent overview of studies on various feminist discourses in Lagerlöf’s work, see Nordlund (2005: 261–77).