**White Fang** as Ethological and Evolutionistic *Bildungsroman*

*Karin Molander Danielsson*

In 1907, siding with nature writer John Burroughs, President Theodore Roosevelt accused a number of writers of animal stories of being “nature-fakers,” because they ascribed to animals what he and Burroughs considered human characteristics, such as reason and choice. (This controversy had in fact started several years earlier and originally included other authors.) In the 1907 outburst, however, Jack London was among the writers thus accused. He relates the controversy in the essay “The Other Animals,” published in March, 1908, where he strongly refutes Burroughs’ claim that animals are automatons that react only mechanically and by instinct, a view of animals that London calls old-fashioned and “homocentric”.

London supports his argument, and defends his criticized dog stories, in two ways. First he acknowledges that other writers had indeed been guilty of humanizing animals, something he strongly disapproves of. London claims that his writing has been designed to create a different impression:

> Time and again, and many times, in my narratives, I wrote, speaking of my dog-heroes: ‘He did not think these things; he merely did them,’ etc. And I did this repeatedly, /.../ in order to hammer into the average human understanding that these dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning. Also, I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution; I hewed them to the mark set by scientific research.

Thus, London specifically connects his stories to evolution, but he also utilizes the essay to assert that although dogs may not possess the means for abstract reasoning, they are capable of reasoning and learning. This he does by relating anecdotes of two of his own dogs, anecdotes which show the dogs exhibiting behaviors that, London claims, cannot have been instinctive or mechanical.

---

tion/animals.html

2 London, 1908, no pag.
In thus connecting his fictional stories not only to his own experience of animals and his own powers of observation but to science and evolution, London is asking for them to be considered in that light. In what follows, I read London’s anecdotes, as well as his story *White Fang*, together with modern ethology and behavioral psychology order to find out how justified his claims were. In short, this paper proposes a reading of Jack London’s novel *White Fang* not only as a representation of White Fang’s development from wild, wolf-dog hybrid to a domesticated house pet, but also as a conscious effort from London to represent a foreshortened but surprisingly astute representation of the evolution of the dog from its wolf ancestors.

**London’s observations of dogs**

London’ first anecdote relates how Rollo, a dog and playmate in rough physical play from London’s childhood, first learns to interpret young Jack’s faked “sitting down and cry” as an actual invitation to play, a kind of play bow, and then learns to imitate this stance himself in order to “trick” the young boy Jack into playing with him. An elaborate use of play bows has been shown by Bekoff3 to be more common in situations dominated by behavior which could easily be misunderstood, rough wrestling, biting, etc., exactly the kind of play London describes. Bekoff has also shown that play is highly rewarding for dogs. What is more, social learning in dogs, learning how to do things after watching demonstrations by humans, has also been described, e.g. by Pongrácz et al. 2001, cited in Miklósi4. Rollo imitating a move that is designed to facilitate more (rewarding) play is thus a very good example of social learning, and also of operant conditioning by means of positive reinforcement: in other words, a voluntary behavior (not a reflex) is made more frequent by the fact that it is reinforced by something the dog (in this case) considers a reward.

In London’s own analysis of this episode, however, he hurries over the imitation part, which he calls instinctive, and discusses instead how he developed the game in order to “fool” the dog once more, by pretending to see someone arrive and then pretending to talk to this person through the window. That Rollo breaks off the game and immediately seems to understand that somebody has arrived at the door is what London finds remarkable in this episode and evidence of reasoning:

> From the fact that his master turned suddenly toward the door, and from the fact that his master’s voice, facial expression, and whole demeanor expressed surprise and delight, he concluded that a friend was outside. He established a

---

relation between various things, and the act of establishing relations between things is an act of reason — of rudimentary reason, granted, but none the less of reason.\textsuperscript{5}

The fact that dogs are very adept at noticing and interpreting oral, facial and body expressions in humans has been noted in many experiments. Miklósi moreover, notes that “dogs seem to live in the visual field of the human. This means that the direction that is in focus for the human becomes significant for the dog also”.\textsuperscript{6} And we saw how Rollo immediately shifted his attention to what Jack London seemed to be looking at. Furthermore, any dog trainer can testify that dogs are quick to learn various social cues from humans, not just verbal commands.

London’s other example is slightly different, and does not involve social cueing. Glen is a puppy who learns to associate a car ride with the tooting of the horn which invariably precedes the car driving off. Glen enjoys riding in the car very much, so he quickly learns that the horn is his signal to run to the car, or he will miss his chance of a ride. London describes how the puppy even abandons his breakfast to run when horn sounds, in other words, how he exhibits his ability to make a choice. London tells the story, proposes that Glen had learned that cars were fast, that the horn belonged to the car, etc., and then explains it thus: “Out of the propositions which I have shown were Glen’s, and which had become his through the medium of his own observation of the phenomena of life, he made the new proposition that when the horn tooted it was time for him to get on board”\textsuperscript{7}

London’s explanation can, I think, be interpreted as a proposition that Glen learns to associate the sound with something desired, and modifies his behavior in order to maximize what he considers a reward, which again can be recognized in behaviorist terms as operant conditioning by means of positive reinforcement: the rewarding car ride makes the puppy repeat the behavior, that is, the run to the car. Interestingly, the rest of the story of Glen and the car describes the extinction of this behavior, another possible outcome of operant conditioning when the behavior results in neither reward nor punishment. In order to play a trick on Glen, the chauffeur of the car starts tooting the horn without any intention of driving off. Glen is prompted by the horn to leave his food a number of times, but finally, when the rewarding ride is withheld every time, he stops running to the car at the sound of the horn, and stays to finish his breakfast. In terms of behavioral psychology, his behavior, once learned through positive reinforcement, has been extinguished.

\textsuperscript{5} London 1908, no pag.
\textsuperscript{6} Miklósi 2009, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{7} London 1908, no pag.
London’s anecdotes are interesting, both because they demonstrate what London had actually observed in real dogs, and because he describes these incidents in ways which show that he was not quite aware of what he had observed, or how to explain it. The last fact is of course not at all surprising; dog ethology was not even in its infancy in 1908, and although London cites George Romanes, a friend of Darwin’s who in 1882 had published the work *Animal Intelligence*, it is perhaps symptomatic that George Romanes was criticized for using anecdotal evidence rather than empirical studies to support his theories. Nevertheless, London’s stories demonstrate the power of positive reinforcement. Rollo, rewarded by play and social interaction, learns to imitate young Jack, and to interpret his facial signs and other social cues. Glen, rewarded by the car ride, learns to run to the car when the horn sounds, etc.

We can see that London had noted the co-occurrence of positive reinforcement and learning in situations when nobody desires it, even if he has not got the terminology or the theory to describe it. However, if we turn to London’s two long, fictional dog stories in which dog training plays a big role, positive reinforcement is conspicuous by its absence, at least in the cases where dogs are trained by humans. Both *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* were of course already written by the time London wrote this essay, and it is possible that the essay is the result of new realizations on the part of London. I find it more probable, however, that both novels describe what probably was the pre-dominant methods of dog training at the time, methods dominated by positive punishment, that is, the infliction of pain or other discomfort in order to stop a behavior.

Regardless of the methods London describes, they do result in the canine characters learning new skills. There are also a number of situations where the dog or wolf learns in other ways, through interaction with other canines or the environment, or when they learn from human behavior. Reading London’s dog stories for their representations of cognitive processes shows how London makes use of his talent for observation. Even if he sometimes anthropomorphizes, (often in *The Call of the Wild*, less so in *White Fang*) there are also numerous descriptions that are recognizable as fair representations of canine cognition.

---

8 Romanes’ work was criticized by E H Thorndike, who performed the first more scientific studies of learning processes in cats and dogs, published in a series of articles from 1898 onwards, which London may well have known about, but never mentions.


The question of genre

The rest of this paper focuses on the novel *White Fang* and the canine social cognition processes represented in this novel. This is the latter of the two companion novels about canids. The first, *The Call of the Wild*, was published in 1903 and describes the life of a dog that ultimately turns feral and follows a pack of wolves into the wild. *White Fang*, from 1906, tells the reverse story: The cub, born in the wild to a feral, half dog and half wolf dam, and a wolf sire, is caught by Indians when he is a few months old, beaten into submission and used in a team with other dogs to pull a sled, and later sold to a man who uses him in dog fights, from whom he is rescued by a Southlander. This man ultimately takes him back to California, where the three quarters wolf learns to become a house pet. The story of White Fang’s life is often painfully brutal (and racist) but the ending, where the old wolf learns to adapt to a “civilized” life on a California estate, is an ostentatiously happy one, with White Fang dozing in the sun, watching his puppies born to the family’s sheepdog bitch play in the sun. The happy ending, the fact that the protagonist and focalizer is followed from birth to old age, and the fact that this, as most other stories with animal protagonists, is usually considered a story for children or young adults, has contributed to it being read as a *Bildungsroman*.  

Robisch argues in *Wolves and the Wolf Myth in American Literature* that reading *White Fang* as a *Bildungsroman* risks placing it in the comedy genre (with a happy ending) rather than in the genre of naturalistic, deterministic tragedy, where the wolf, represented by White Fang, is destined to succumb to domestication and death. Robisch’s argument is strong, especially if we, as Robisch, consider the novel as part of the American literary naturalism tradition which favored a plot of decline. However, since learning, adapting, and developing is a powerful motif in *White Fang*, and since the focalizer of this 3rd person narrative is the developing canid, the learning processes are hard to ignore. If we therefore read White Fang’s “education” in less anthropomorphic terms, as a representation of social and other cognition in the wild and half-tamed canid, another picture emerges. We see for instance how White Fang learns physical and social laws as a response to operant conditioning and how he learns to interpret human behavior because this, too, is a way to gain rewards and to avoid punishment. We see how he grows attached to a particular human, and demonstrates this by developing separation anxiety when the human leaves, and by soliciting muzzle grabs a sign of submission when the human returns. Towards the end of the story, he also learns how to communicate with humans in different ways, and how to co-exist with a group of conspecifics, that is, other dogs. At the end of the story, the feral dog-wolf hybrid has become a dog, in that he has learnt and adapted to typical dog behavior.

---

In the following I will take a closer look at the cognitive processes represented in the novel and compare them to recent ethological research. Being a literary scholar, and not an ethologist, I realize the hazards of my approach, but I consider the use of ethology in literary analysis of animal representation a fruitful and exciting addition to traditional literary study, and especially in the study of literary works with realistic or naturalistic ambitions.

My knowledge of ethology derives mostly from Miklosi’s *Dog Behaviour, Evolution, and Cognition* from 2009, a standard work in higher education. For this essay I have also used Topal et al’s: “The Dog as a Model for Understanding Human Social Behaviour” from 2010. The article by Topal et al proposes that there exist behavioral analogies between dogs and humans, and that these can be organized in three sets of skills: synchronization [for example] social learning and rule following, attachment toward humans, and communication.12 These areas are interesting for my approach because, as Topal et al show, although dogs and humans are shown to be similar in these respects, dogs and wolves typically differ. As this paper will show, White Fang’s development in the novel describes a trajectory from wolf behavior to dog behavior, in that he, in different stages of his development, learns and exhibits each of these three skills.

**Wolf cognition**

Following the plot line of the novel, I will first discuss some early examples of cognitive processes, where London describes how the new born grey wolf cub learns from his mother and from the environment, before he comes into contact with humans. I argue that this is London’s way of showing the cub as wolf, a wild animal. Wolf cub development in the wild is, for obvious reasons, difficult to research, and I have not found any data that corroborates London’s description. But my point here is to show that the first chapters of the novel contrast with later ones, and show the cub in his original wolf shape. His “clay”, as London calls it, has not yet been molded into a dog.

London’s descriptions of White Fang’s cognitive processes start immediately when he is born. The grey cub (so far without a name) uses his available senses, touch, taste and smell, to learn to know his mother, and is reinforced by warmth, food, and security. As soon as his eyes open and he is able to take in visual impressions, he learns about his surroundings, from a combination of reinforcement and punishment: He learns that he is in a cave with three hard walls that block his wanderings, and a forth, characterized by light, that fascinates and entices him, but that his mother stops him from investigating by rolling him over with her paw:

---

Thus he learned hurt; and on top of it he learned to avoid hurt, first, by not incurring the risk of it; and second, when he had incurred the risk, by dodging and by retreating. These were conscious actions, and were the results of his first generalizations upon the world.13

Most of these generalizations are restraints, limitations on the cub’s freedom, and London early on makes a point of the cub learning to avoid these restraints, in other words, to avoid punishment:

So the grey cub knew fear, though he knew not the stuff of which fear was made. Possibly he accepted it as one of the restrictions of life. For he had already learned that there were such restrictions. … all was not freedom in the world, … to life there were limitations and restraints. These limitations and restraints were laws. To be obedient to them was to escape hurt and make for happiness. … And after such classification he avoided the things that hurt, the restrictions and restraints, in order to enjoy the satisfactions and the remunerations in life.14

What London calls classification is what we, since Skinner, call operant conditioning: a voluntary behavior is changed, due to its consequence(s). London establishes here a readymade method for learning that White Fang taps into in many future situations, as we will see.

The cub learns, not exactly to hunt, but rather, that he is a hunter, when he by accident wanders into a ptarmigan nest and playfully catches a chick in his mouth. He likes the sensation of biting into it, and this brings further reinforcement when he tastes the blood and the meat.15 Blood and meat are always connected; London does not miss any opportunity to point out that the cub eats living things, but also to show how vulnerable the cub is himself, that the hunter also can be the hunted. This illustrates another “law” for the cub, that of eating or be eaten, the law of the wild. This also causes the cub to develop a general distrust of his environment, of other animals, for instance.

What London calls White Fang’s inherited fear of the unknown is further strengthened by experience when the cub tries to walk on water, falls in the river, and almost drowns. This gives him “distrust in appearances”, and we learn that the cub “would have to learn the reality of a thing before he could put his faith in it”.16 Here London obviously anthropomorphizes,

---

and extends the argument too far, but most canid cubs or pups will have a similar experience with water at some early point, and will learn at least that they cannot walk on water, so the episode feels relevant at least. This episode, and the cub’s distrust in appearances is however also used as the first indication and explanation of his generally distrusting nature.

London seems to have been ignorant about young wolf cubs typically being reared in packs, and lets the grey cub grow up with only his mother, but it is clear that he thinks that he describes the first months of a typical wolf cub. By the end of Part Two, the cub has grown enough to help his mother hunt, and together they kill a lynx that earlier has threatened to kill him. Thus far we have seen the cub as wolf, a part of the wilderness, a perfect fit in the world that goes on without human involvement. But this is the last time the cub is a nameless wolf. In the following sections, the cub is found and claimed by an Indian, Grey Beaver, and transported to an Indian camp.

**Domestication begins**
The cub is named White Fang by Grey Beaver, whose words “He is my dog” mark the beginning of White Fang’s transformation into a domesticated animal. Once White Fang is present in the camp, the interesting thing happens that London starts emphasizing White Fang’s dog ancestry. Whereas “the grey cub” before was represented as all wolf, part of the wilderness, he is now a dog among the other dogs, albeit an unusual one. “White Fang had never seen dogs before, but at sight of them he felt that they were his own kind, only somehow different”. From this point onwards, White Fang has to learn how to survive in the vicinity of humans and dogs, and London’s narrative is very much focused on this learning process.

**Synchronization**
Here is it time to introduce one of Topal et al.’s set of skills, namely synchronization. The definition of synchronization in Topal et al. is as follows: “processes leading to behavioral or motivational/emotional conformity” and examples might be e.g. that dogs learn from the behavior of conspecifics (other dogs) and from humans, so called social learning, and that they learn to follow rules. What White Fang learns above all is that “the man-animals were gods unmistakable and unescapable … He belonged to them as all dogs belonged to them. His actions were theirs to command. His body was theirs to maul, to stamp upon, to tolerate. Such was the lesson that was quickly

---

19 Topal et. al, p.95.
borne in upon him”.20 As this quote shows, this is a lesson learned mostly with punishment, but it has the effect that White Fang learns to follow the rules.

There is a scene in this early part of the novel – deeply disturbing – that shows how White Fang learns about the man-animals’ superiority. White Fang tries to swim after his mother who is taken away up the river in a canoe. When Grey Beaver catches up with him, he beats him up. White Fang tries to assert himself, he snarls at the man, but gets only more abuse. When he breaks down and cries, the beating stops, but when White Fang then sinks his teeth into Grey Beaver’s foot, the abuse starts all over again.

Not only the hand, but the hard wooden paddle was used upon him; and he was bruised and sore in all his small body when he was again flung down in the canoe. Again, and this time with purpose, did Grey Beaver kick him. White Fang did not repeat his attack on the foot. he had learned another lesson of his bondage. Never, no matter what the circumstance, must he dare to bite the god who was lord and master over him ... That was ... the one offence there was no condoning nor overlooking.21

Topal et al., (citing De Waal 1996, and Bekoff and Allen, 1998) claim that “obedient behaviour of dogs and their ‘desire to please us’ is partially based on their social skill at comprehending and following social rules”.22 Once White Fang has learnt the extent of Grey Beaver’s violence, his desire to avoid it is enough to teach him new things: “Obedience, rigid, undeviating obedience, was what was expected of him; and in return, he escaped beatings and his existence was tolerated”.23 White Fang has learnt a social rule.

**Attachment**

From now on, he is faithful and obedient to Grey Beaver, he works hard in the sled team, and in return he gets some protection against humans and other dogs. However, London is quick to point out:

He had no attachment for Grey Beaver .... There were deeps in [White Fang’s] nature which had never been sounded. A kind word, a caressing touch of the hand on the part of Grey Beaver, might have sounded these deeps; but Gray Beaver did not caress, nor speak kind words.24

---

22 Topal et. al, p. 97.
The ability to form an attachment is, according to Topal et al., one of the skills typical of dogs and humans, but White Fang is not there yet. Grey Beaver shows no affection for him; therefore White Fang does not learn this particular lesson, and it will take some years before this happens.

After a series of violent adventures White Fang ends up in the possession of Weedon Scott, a Southlander and an educated man, who believes that White Fang can be turned in to a good working sled dog. Here starts a new phase in White Fang’s life, which rapidly starts developing more dog characteristics. One is that he forms an attachment with Weedon Scott. Scott wins White Fang’s confidence, first by hand feeding him, and then, by massaging the head and ears of the growling dog. White Fang gradually learns not only to accept this, but to enjoy it, and an attachment is formed. This corresponds nicely to research done on shelter dogs (Gácsi et al., 2001, cited in Topal et al.) who even after a long periods without human contact quickly are able to form relationships with humans. Topal et al. also point out that another study (Marston et al. 2005) “found that physical contact (massage) was more effective than obedience training as a form of handling in evoking patterns of attachment toward humans”.25

Attachment exists when certain criteria are fulfilled. The animal is supposed to show stress when separated from the human, seek contact with the human, and show specific greeting behaviors, and these behaviors must be “quantitatively different from similar actions performed toward a stranger”.26 After a short time in Weedon Scott’s company, White Fang fulfills the criteria. When Scott goes away on business, White Fang stops eating and won’t work. When Scott finally comes back, White Fang reacts with joy: “White Fang came to him, not with a great bound, yet quickly…. as he drew near, his eyes took on a strange expression. Scott’s musher Matt comments: “He never looked at me that way all the time you was gone,”27 so we can see that this behavior is reserved for Scott. The specific greeting behavior mentioned above is also first expressed at this time: “He suddenly thrust his head forward and nudged his head in between his master’s arm and his body”.28 The greeting behavior is similar to what is called a muzzle grasp used to confirm an established relationship.29

According to Topal et al, wolf cubs and dog pups differ in their ability to form attachments to humans: “Despite being hand-raised and socialized to an extreme level . . . hand-reared gray wolf pups did not seem to discriminate between their caregiver and a stranger greeting them when left alone in an unfamiliar enclosure”.30 In other words, the fact that White

25 Topal et. al, p. 91.
26 Topal et. al, p. 89.
28 Ibid.
30 Topal et. al, p. 90.
Fang is now able to form an attachment to a human can also be seen as a step on his way to development into a dog.

**Communication**

During his time with Scott in the Yukon, White Fang also learns another social skill, falling under the term *synchronization*, namely to read human intentions. He guards Scott’s cabin, and attacks anyone who approaches it in a furtive and suspicious manner, but lets people pass who walk openly and directly to the door. He also reads signs of Scott’s intention to leave the Yukon again, when he starts packing, and this time he breaks out of the cabin, follows Scott to the ferry, and more or less forces his master to take him along to California.

In California White Fang has to adapt to a life on a small ranch, and learn more social rules such as leaving chickens and other ranch animals alone. This is also where he acquires a skill from the third set of Topal et al’s skills typical for domesticated dogs, namely the skill of initializing *communication* with humans. Miklósi et al also mention this as something typical for dogs, namely that they “have a strong propensity to initialize communicative interactions with humans”. It is interesting how Miklósi points out that similar experiments with socialized wolves do not result in similar communication.

Up to this point White Fang is silent, like most wolves, he never barks. But then he is put in a situation where he has to direct the attention of humans onto himself and a problem. Weedon Scott is out riding, and is thrown off his horse and hurt. He sends White Fang home, saying, “Go on home and tell them what’s happened to me”. White Fang goes home, but he has problems making the family at home understand. He tries growling and pulling with his teeth at the dress of Scott’s wife, but only succeeds in making them nervous. Then he hits upon something that works.

He had ceased from his growling and stood, head up, looking into their faces. His throat worked spasmodically, but made no sound, while he struggled with all his body, convulsed with the effort to rid himself of the incommunicable something that strained for utterance. … ‘he is trying to speak, I do

---

31 Miklósi, p. 178.
32 Ibid.
believe’, Beth announced. At this moment speech came to White Fang, rushing up in a great burst of barking. ‘Something has happened to Weedon’, his wife said decisively.34

When White Fang acquires another dog skill, barking, he is also able to communicate with the humans in order to solve a problem.

London was, for his time, a skilled observer and describer of animal behavior. In White Fang, he describes how a wolf-dog hybrid is moved from the wilderness to gradually more domesticated situations, and how he, in response to environmental challenges, develops skills that according to modern ethology are characteristics of domestic dogs: the ability to learn and follow social rules, to form attachments to humans, to interpret human intentions, and to communicate with humans in order to solve problems. As several studies show, dogs are considerably more proficient at these skills than wolves, and I think it is interesting to speculate whether London made White Fang a wolf-dog hybrid (rather than a wolf) because he assumed that a similar development in a purebred wolf would be unlikely. London claims: “I endeavored to make my stories in line with the facts of evolution”, and while the complete story of the evolution of the dog has yet to be told, I hope to have shown that White Fang can be read both as an ethological Bildungsroman, and as an allegory of the evolution of the domestic dog.

**Works cited**


---


At the 2013 international conference organized by ASLE, The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, the Mälardalen University research group Ekokritiskt forum was represented by a panel on Swedish children’s literature, made up by Sture Packalén, Magnus Jansson, Karin Molander Danielsson and Marie Öhman. The panel presented environmentalist and ecopedagogical readings of children’s literature from the 20th century. The papers have been collected here, in the same order as they were presented at the conference, but sadly, for practical and economic reasons, without the many illustrations used in the presentations. In what follows, two papers discuss texts from what could be described as the golden age of Swedish children’s literature, the early 20th century, whereas the other two bring up texts from the latter half of the 20th century.

The first paper, by Sture Packalén, takes its point of departure in a supposed Swedish sense of nature, often noted by foreign and Swedish critics, and discusses its realization in the famous picture books by Elsa Beskow. As Packalén shows in this paper, the sense of nature is presented to the children in a certain blend of realism and imagination, which constitutes a tradition in Swedish children’s literature. The second paper, by Magnus Jansson, presents a reading of Selma Lagerlöf’s geography reader Nils Holgersson’s Wonderful Journey through Sweden, that highlights the ecopedagogical effects of some of its narrative features. It shows for example how animal characters and animal narrators evoke in the reader a concern for their situation as victims of what humans do to the environment. In the third paper, Karin Molander Danielsson discusses the ecopedagogical design of Swedish children’s literature from the sixties and seventies. These texts follow in the tradition of the canonical Ur-texts by Beskow and Lagerlöf, but are influenced by radical environmentalism and other political movements typical of the times, something which complicates the traditional blend of realism and fantasy. The fourth paper, by Marie Öhman, discusses Astrid Lindgren’s novel Ronja The Robber’s Daughter, published in 1981. In this modern fairytale by Sweden’s arguably most famous author of children’s books, the didactic realism seen in some texts of the 1970s is moderated, but the environmentalist concerns about the human position in nature are still present. Öhman shows, among other things, how the forest in this novel is represented as a source of protection and concord, reflecting the ideas of the environmentalist movement of the 1980s.
Elsa Beskow and the Nordic View of Nature

Sture Packalén

Elsa Beskow is the most famous Swedish author of picture books for chil-
dren. Beskow looks at nature with the eyes of a child and with a child’s
perspective. In her picture books it is first of all the forest (Peter in Blueberry
Land, 1901; Children of the Forest, 1910; The Sun Egg, 1932), and then the field
(Pelle’s New Suit, 1911), and after this the meadow and the garden (Flower Fes-
tival in the Hill, 1914; George’s Book, 1916; Little Lasse in the Garden, 1920) which
set the scene for her fairytale-like stories. Finally she also includes the lake
and the sea in this landscape (Baby Brother’s Sailing Journey, 1921; The Curious
Fish, 1933). Beskow shares nature as a source of inspiration and starting
point with Ottilia Adelborg (The Princes’ Flower Alphabet, 1893), Walter Crane
(Floras Feast, 1892) and Ernst Kreidolf (Blumenmärchen, 1898). What is sig-
nificant in this context is also the reformatory ideas about teaching that
Beskow became aware of by studying the methods taught by Ellen Key (The
Century of the Child, 1900), in which the pupil who by her/his knowledge

obtained a view of the great connected system of existence,
the connection between nature and man’s life, between the
present and the past, between peoples and ideas, cannot lose
his education. Only the person who, through the mental
nourishment he has received, sees more clearly, feels more
ardently, has absorbed completely the wealth of life, has
been really educated. This education can be gained in the
most irregular way, perhaps around the hearth or in the
field, on the seashore or in the wood; it can be acquired from
old tattered books or from nature itself.1

From a hundred-year perspective Beskow appears in her children’s books
as an extremely skilled ecopedagogue because of the way in which she re-
counts and portrays nature. What kind of nature is it then that we meet in
Beskow, what part does it play and how is it depicted? In this short presen-
tation I will concentrate on the forest only. Peter in Blueberry Land (1901)2 is
Beskow’s first big picture book, stylistically Jugend-inspired with decor-
atively woven fern leaves and blueberry sprigs, a sort of Swedish-branded
Jugend style. The book struck a new note since it lacked direct pedagogical
pointers but instead was characterised by a sort of playfulness and magic.
In this book nature and its inhabitants come to the aid of humans, indeed,
nature is seen almost as a paradise-like condition. What she portrays is

---

2 Elsa Beskow (1901; 1987), Peter in Blueberry Land. Edinburgh.
nature imbued with a romantic and National Romantic spirit, in which the decorations become a part of the story.

The book is about Peter, who has gone to the forest to pick blueberries and cranberries for his mother's birthday, but cannot find any. Through his meeting with nature, with the forest, the child Peter, who in true Romantic spirit is also receptive to impressions from another dimension than reality, is led into the world of fantasy. When he searches the forest for berries in vain, a tiny man comes to his rescue. Here fairy tale and reality merge into a wide-eyed observation of dreamlike pictures and realistic details. Beskow's illustrations show that she had a deep understanding of the animal and plant kingdoms. Her exact observations of nature give credibility to the fantastic. Details of nature are woven into the narrative and never become a decorative end in themselves. Beskow gets close in on the motif. In her story-telling and meticulous drawing she focuses on what is at the micro level in nature. The whole of nature is seen from a marvelling child's perspective. It is the closeness to the ground, with pine needles, rotten leaves and palm-like ferns that captures her interest. She makes co-actors of ants, spiders, wasps, ladybirds, grasshoppers, lizards, snails, mice, beetles and caterpillars in the fairy-tale-like course of events.

In the entirety that arises upon reading the text and pictures, in the iconotext, an almost symbiotic interplay between text and picture emerges. Through this close interplay, Beskow not only gives nature a voice, but also intensifies the experience of nature and conveys an emotional empathy and a conception of nature that can be said to be particular to the Nordic countries: Nature welcoming the child, the innocent human being, and opening up her senses to a new, exciting and at the same time well-ordered world. Man is completely integrated into this world, as Nature's guest, not exploiting it but with an open mind having the privilege to visit it, to experience adventure and then also to have the opportunity to return home.

Even though all the Jugend-like style found in Peter in Blueberry Land is missing from Beskow's second book, Children of the Forest, which came out in 1910, Beskow still has all her sensitivity left for the creatures of the forest. By means of the fairy-tale form and the realistic illustration of humanlike figures in an easily recognisable natural environment, Beskow succeeds in conveying a feeling of being chosen and in communion with nature surrounding us. Beskow expresses her ecopedagogical intentions clearly prior to the publication of Children of the Forest when she in a letter writes thus: “My intention with this book is to carry children off with me to the forest, to get them to love its moss and bark and stones, to get them as it were to feel the scent of resin and pine needles and the soft moss

---

under their feet.” 4 Similar contemporary ambitions to make the Swedish people interested in the forest can be seen in the dioramas at the Biology Museum on Djurgården in Stockholm, which opened in 1893. Exhibited there were stuffed animals placed in artificial habitats set against realistically depicted countryside backgrounds by the well-known nature painter Bruno Liljefors.

*Children of the Forest* is a tale of the seasons, beginning in the late summer. We are given a glimpse of the family’s life during the autumn and winter and the story ends with the arrival of spring. The narrative begins by telling us that the forest family live under the same conditions and terms as the other inhabitants of the forest. The forest, which in previous tales has often been portrayed as frightening, with goblins and other fairytale creatures, as a place where one can get lost, for example in the stories by the Grimm brothers, becomes in Beskow’s work a welcoming and enchanted world where it is good – albeit strenuous – to live. Beskow presents the forest family thus:

Deep in the forest, under the curling roots of an old pine tree, was a small house. Warm and dry in winter, cool and airy in summer, it was the home of one of the forest people. He lived there with his wife and four children; Tom, Harriet, Sam and Daisy.

Wild strawberries and mushrooms grew by their door and they had all the pots, pans, chairs, beds, tables, knives, forks and spoons they could possibly need. Sheltered under the pine tree branches, they hardly felt the autumn gales and if it rained, the children crept underneath a giant toadstool to keep dry. 5

Mother is the uniting figure who gives love and makes sure that their household functions with the picking of berries, mushrooms, cotton grass and other things from Nature’s pantry. The children are often out on their own, they are invited to flying trips by the bat at the forest lake in the evening, they swing with the elves, run away from the playful mountain troll, and their red hats act as camouflage when hiding from humans and wild animals. The winter gives them school holidays and games in the snow, and the spring brings happy hours at the stream – and a new child in the family. The life cycle begins anew.

On the whole the relationship between humans in elf guise and animals is symbiotic. The hare allows itself to be harnessed to the sleigh, but the forest family also give of their abundance: “Harriet! Daisy!” called

---

5 *Children of the Forest*, p. 1.
their father. “We must make up a basket of food from our cupboards. It has been so cold that some of our friends may not have enough to eat.”

There is no conflict between nature and humanoids here; it is a sanitised depiction of nature, where the question of eat or be eaten is completely absent. Nature is not hostile and never hits back, but continues to exist in an almost idyllic, preindustrial state of balance and unspoiledness. But like in every paradise, there is a snake. Father, in his fir cone apparel, demonstrates his bravery in the battle against the snake in this paradise. Mother, however, takes – without fear – her three eldest children to the Owl mother’s school for the children of the forest. It can be said that Beskow is portraying an eco-system that is harmonious in an unnatural way. The animals and humanoids live in an artificial, non-aggressive balance. The elf father admittedly kills the snake which threatens the idyllic façade, but at the same time there is an underlying conception that nature, unspoilt by humans, is a harmonious world, which works best if the animals can set the tone and not humans.

I would like to claim that in the view of nature expressed in Beskow’s verbal and visual narrative, in her iconotext, there is a form of emotional empathy for nature which has been handed down for a hundred years and taught in the home and at school. In her books nature is portrayed as a partner to be taken good care of. It could be said that generations of Nordic children have received their gentle view of nature through reading Beskow’s books or having them read to them. By being read aloud in the children’s bedrooms or at school, her books have passed on the traditions of Linnaeus regarding the observation of nature and handed down an empathic feeling for nature. In this way the children in the Nordic countries have already acquired a basic ethical attitude which means a good and close relationship to nature. This attitude is also reflected in the unique Nordic right of public access, a common law which around the turn of the century in 1900 was considered to be prevalent by dint of age, but which can be traced back to a long time ago. It constitutes a right for everybody in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland to travel on foot, to make temporary overnight stays and to pick berries and mushrooms on privately-owned land; it is the right that the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency formulates as an obligation in the words “Don’t disturb – don’t destroy”.

Incorporating the awareness of nature in this Nordic right of public access, Beskow’s insight into nature, her sober observation and ability to recount in a way that both amazes and is easy to take in, in a most often unwitting but decisive way influenced the Swedish and Nordic valuation perspectives concerning nature: that it is understood to be a place where there is consolation, help, fellowship, harmony, some danger, but that it

6 Children of the Forest, p. 27.

is also seen as an almost sacred place where one can gain strength and inspiration, a refuge to obtain peace of mind. Indeed one can speak about an almost unique reverence for nature, a worship of nature that among the secularised Scandinavians has in many respects replaced belief in traditional religion.

In this “green philosophy of life” Beskow still today fits in well with her account of our great closeness to nature and her concern about it. Her books both reflect and enhance the awareness of nature, the basic ethical attitude to nature. In her work, the perspective is anthropocentric, but what she depicts through her humanised figures is a person who adapts herself to and sees herself as a part of nature, upon which all of us are extremely dependent. Through precisely this perspective Beskow’s picture books are both an expression of what is particular in the Nordic way of looking at nature and a lasting example of Nordic eco-pedagogy for children.

Beskow’s characterisation of the cycle of life in the animal and plant kingdoms contains no pointers, but is an early expression of environmental education, precisely because it is rooted in a world in which Swedish children can recognise themselves. She has a down-to-earth form of address which causes children not to tire of her books. Recognition of one’s own place/forest leads to an emotional involvement which can both lead to a greater understanding of others’ safeguarding of their places, and to a feeling of accountability in more global terms. When Beskow tells stories, describes and depicts her own Nordic place, she presents it in a way that is not confined to a certain generation but on the contrary in a way that has been passed on between generations for over a hundred years now. What is so very special with Beskow, and what makes her the foremost Nordic ecopedagogue in children’s literature, is that she has the ability to give voice to nature, that she speaks for nature, which cannot itself speak – and that we Nordic people listen, for the very reason that the voice emanates from one well-known place and an empathic awareness of nature which forms a part of the basic values in the Nordic countries.

Works cited

Beskow, Elsa (1901;1987), *Peter in Blueberry Land*. Edinburgh.