Traditional storytelling and new environmentalism in Astrid Lindgren’s *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter*

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Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002) is one of Sweden’s most beloved writers, and the preferably Smålandish settings of her stories have come to represent the ideal image of Swedish nature. In that respect she is a caretaker of the idyllic nature-romantic tradition of Elsa Beskow and Selma Lagerlöf, in which nature is depicted as providing an esthetically pleasing pantry in return for human care. Lindgren is also considered to be an important contributor to the origin of a new type of literature: In 1945 she published the non-didactic, norm-critical story about Pippi Longstocking. Exclusively told from the child’s point of view it became the starting point for the so called modern Swedish children’s book. Lindgren’s strong and unconventional child characters have since then become parts of a collective conceptual consciousness. Thus, in that respect, she is anything but a preserver of tradition, values and ideas.

These two somewhat contradictory images of Lindgren’s work are reflected in pictures of Lindgren herself as she is commonly represented either, nostalgically pondering in a piece of idyllic Swedish landscape, or as seemingly taking on the role of a child by defiantly refusing to act according to norms and social rules. An underlying assumption of this paper is that the concurrent presence of tradition and new thinking is part of Lindgren’s literary method, in *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter* (1981) even an ecopedagogical method: By means of the recognizable, she effortlessly conveys new ideas and ways of thinking, tradition constitutes a means for renewal, if you will. In earlier works of Lindgren, such as *Pippi Longstocking* or *Lotta on Troublemaker Street*, new ideas about the child or gender were introduced. In *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter* [Ronja Rövardotter, 1981] the new thinking rather concerns nature and the human-nature relationship.

In *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter* Lindgren engages the robber novel, which was a highly popular genre during the 19th century, to express what is generally considered to be a modern generation conflict: The story follows two antagonist robber families (Matt’s Robbers and Borka’s Robbers), whose animosity and uncivilized way of life is being questioned by their respective children (Ronia and Birk), since their growing friendship and moral attitude are incompatible with competition and plundering. Due to this conflict Ronia and Birk set out on a “journey”, actually a summer spent in the woods away from home. They discover the hardships of a life in and of nature, and when they return home, they have reached new insights about themselves and about life in general. The plot is thus modeled on a classic fairy tale or children’s book’s plot (that is: conflict – break up – journey – homecoming). As such the story is easily interpreted psychologically, as representing a developmental process by which Ronia and Birk grow from dependent children to independent individuals. In *The Use of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim points at a recurrent correspondence between fairy tale elements and the existential conditions a growing child faces on its way to adulthood. However, Lindgren brings a novel dimension to this process, by suggesting that individuation presupposes a certain element of environmental concern. I will give three short examples of this conduct, by relating passages from the text to characteristics of contemporary environmentalism.

The 1970’s was a highly ideological and political decade. Several major shifts occurred, that involved a new kind of awareness of the ties between environmental and social problems. The environmentalist movement’s primary concern was pollution and the preservation of nature resources. Rachel Carson’s novel *Silent Spring* (1962) initiated an ongoing discussion on the long-term effects of the

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agricultural industry’s use of organic pesticides, and her anticipation of a world without birdsong had called for legislation and governmental action. Reports on necessary limits for human consumerism and expansion were published, and a significant number of writers and looked to political theory (like socialism, anarchism, feminism) when critiquing environmental problems. You could speak about an overall politicization of nature. In Sweden the environmentalist party [Miljöpartiet] was formed in 1981, the same year as Ronia the Robbers Daughter was published.

The conflict between Ronia and her father could be said to have a political undertone, since it in fact originates in their different attitudes towards ownership and accumulation. Ronia’s father, Matt, represents a capitalist point of view: Not only does he unfairly appropriate large amounts of property and possessions every day. He also refuses to share his wealth with the less successful Borka Robbers, who suffer from starvation and other hardships during the winter. Ronia could similarly be said to represent a socialist point of view: She gradually realizes that her father’s wealth depends on other people’s poverty, and out of solidarity she secretly shares her family’s resources with Birk. Especially interesting for my line of argument is the fact that Matt’s and Ronia’s different standpoints are at work also in their relation to nature: Matt claims ownership to the forest, even naming it Matt’s Forest. Ronia initially adopts her father’s attitude. However, Birk introduces her to a more collectivistic way of thinking:

“I want you to leave my fox cubs alone and get out of my forest!
Your fox cubs! Your woods! Fox cubs belong to themselves – don’t you know that?
And they live in the foxes’ wood, which is the wolves’ and bears’ and elks’ and wild horses’ woods too. And the owls’ and the buzzards’ and the wood pigeons’ and the hawks’ and the cuckoos’ sood. And the snails’ and the spiders’ and the ants’ wood.”

Birk thus questions the striving after possessions from an ideological point of view, and in reference to nature. While doing that Birk (and eventually Ronia) also touches on ideas about nature’s immanent value. Fox cubs belong to themselves, he says, seemingly suggesting that they exist in their own right, not as instruments for somebody else’s (read: human) ambitions. The fact that animals are presented as capable of owning is of course in line with that thought.

The question of nature’s value was at the time of the novel’s conception discussed by writers and philosophers, who more closely analyzed the fundamental values and worldviews at work in our views of nature. Christianity and humanism were both blamed for having generated the notion of human husbandry over nature. Lynn White’s article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, showed in some detail how the biblical tradition had contributed to this destructive human-centered world view. Peter Singer and Tom Regan in their turn set the ground for a new ethical stance towards animals, by arguing for animal rights and animal freedom.

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This reconsideration of anthropocentrism is present in *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter’s* representation of animals and other non-human beings. All kinds of unpleasing and scary creatures inhabit Matt’s Forest: grey dwarfs, wild harpies, rumpehs etc. They are all frightening to and undesired by humans. It is made quite clear, however, that humans are equally undesired by these creatures, presenting the human perspective as merely one out of several. It is also suggested that animals are rational subjects, just as humans. During their stay in the woods, Ronia and Birk try to catch and tame two wild horses. They resolutely train and tame them throughout the day:

> They continued to tear and bite at the leather thongs, and sweat ran down their sides, but they went on kicking, and their wild whinnying terrified the animals and birds for miles around. But as the day advanced towards evening, they gradually quieted down. At last the horses were standing still, heads hanging, giving only an occasional subdued and mournful whinny. […] “We’ve tamed [broken] them at last”, Birk said delightedly.

The horses’ resistance is carefully depicted, making the presumed human victory seem even more victorious. Additionally, it could be noted that the original Swedish text uses a word that best translates to “broken” (in brackets), to describe this. Finally it becomes clear, however, that it is the horses that have the most elaborate plan: Ronia takes a firm grip on one of the horses’ mane and swings herself onto its back asserting that she is the one who decides whether she is going to ride or not. However, as soon as having said that “she was flying in a wide arch, headfirst into the lake. She popped up again just in time to see the Villain and Savage [the two horses] disappear between the trees at a full gallop”.

One of the more radical ideas of the environmentalist movement was at the time presented by deep ecology, namely that nature is what they referred to as an “extended self”. Based on the biological assumption that humans as well as animals, insects, bacteria and plants are integral parts of common eco-systems, they maintained that any assault on nature is equal to harming yourself. It is easy to assume that deep ecologists were hoping that this would lead to a more ethical attitude towards nature. In *Ronia the Robber’s Daughter* there is an existential dimension to Ronia’s experience of nature that can be related to this line of thought. When she is allowed to leave Matt’s Fort on her own for the first time she experiences nature in a very special way:

> Of course, she had heard Matt and Lovis talking about things beyond Matt’s Fort; they had talked of the river. But it was not until she could see how it came rushing in wild rapids from deep under Matt’s Mountain that she understood what rivers were. They had talked about the forest. But it was not until she saw it, so dark and mysterious, with all it rustling trees, that she understood what forests were, and she laughed silently because rivers and forests were there. She could scarcely believe it [to think that big trees and large waters existed and were alive, don’t you have to laugh then!].

The quoted passage could of course be regarded as Ronia’s sense of freedom when taking the first step away from the child-parent symbiosis and becoming an independent individual. It is however in this context significant that this process is expressed as equal to a discovery of nature. The human-nature coexistence is further emphasized in the original Swedish version in which trees and waters are

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7 Lindgren, p. 86–87.
8 Lindgren, p. 87.
10 Lindgren, p. 12.
described as living beings (within brackets). Ronia’s discovery of herself and nature then becomes one, the life of herself is also the life of nature.

Works cited

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