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Pippi and Ronia

Astrid Lindgren's light and dark pastoral

Pastoral as critique

In *The poetics of childhood* I explore the way pastoral takes shape in children's literature. Literary pastoral "offers a natural critique of civilization and stands in contradistinction to the 'unnatural' – machines, laws and customs". In the literature of childhood, in particular, the green world is "a retreat from the world's injustices – parental and the extended social world" – and "all that runs contrary to children's sense of freedom" (Natov 2003, 91). In his book on pastoral, Terry Gifford notes that pastoral always used nature to contrast with urban life and "a delight in nature is assumed in describing these texts as pastoral" (Gifford 1999, 2).

Pastoral grows out of a desire to affirm values that have become diverted, perverted, or usurped. It works by drawing away from the worldly world in order to escape it and, by implication, to challenge it. Pastoral removes us from the chronology and recognizable locations of realistic fiction. It echoes the suspension of time experienced in childhood where the summer felt like forever and the landscape could hold all children. It is a natural world artificially created, an odd mixture of traditional, archetypal, conventional structures and fresh, startling metaphor, constructed out of the desire for innocence, for a time undegraded. Lindgren's work grows out of such desire.

Mimetic and imaginary pastorals

In her strong opposition to oppression of any kind, to abuse of human dignity, to exploitation, particularly of children, Lindgren turned to the landscapes of her childhood and to versions of pastoral that are both mimetic and imaginary. Her most feminist, radical

child power works, the *Pippi Longstocking* series (1945–48), and *Ronia, the robber's daughter* (1981), shift the female from a passive object of desire, from the female “as being mastered” (Kuznets 1987, 107), to an agent of her own desires. And although both Pippi and Ronia free themselves from objectification and socialization into some “unnatural” order, they represent different aspects of pastoral writing. For Lindgren, Pippi is pastoral itself, the green world that never darkens, eternal freedom and childness. Though her story is set in the socialized world with its injustices, it is a sunny satire where Pippi resists civilization and change. Lindgren places her in juxtaposition to the world of parents, school, social parties, the police, and bullies of all kinds. Spontaneous and free, she lives alone in her little house and yard with her animals and without anything to prohibit her fun. She is the world of play – no rules, chaos without repercussion. And by making her the strongest girl in the world with a trunk full of gold, Lindgren establishes her fearlessness and ability to survive on her own, without the vulnerability of the child. As Pippi says, “Don’t worry about me. I always come out on top”.

Pippi is “wise ignorance”, wise in her instinctual resistance to anything false or moralistic, but moral in her natural kindness. Although originally Lindgren meant Pippi to have “much rougher edges,” like the “nasty quips” which Lindgren “cleansed” from the earliest manuscript (Metcalf 1995, 72, 73), Pippi is essentially a generous and empathic soul. Her ignorance of social mores keeps her a true vehicle for Lindgren’s critique of what she saw as an oppressive social order. And in her clowning, Pippi represents carnival’s comic reversal of order and propriety. She is earthy, hilarious, and anarchic.

Ronia, on the other hand, is born out of the dark forces of nature in the forest during a powerful storm that splits the world into two warring forces. She is the innocence that disrupts the old order. As the child of an infantile but kind father, and a sharp-witted but relatively acquiescent mother, Ronia will go on to challenge the forces of denial that govern the robber world. In that sense, she resembles the archetypal hero of myth and fairy tale. And she is also the complex and changing hero of the *bildungsroman* in that her story is about her developing consciousness and her struggles, particularly with her father, for her independence. As the hero of this dark pastoral, she never loses her love of nature, both the light and dark sides, which are always shifting: the dark moments in spring and summer; the lovely fall with its early dark days that foreshadow the limited mobility and danger of winter.



Lindgren, Astrid. Pippi Långstrump i Söderhavet. Ill. Ingrid Vang Nyman. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1951. © Saltkråkan AB, Lidingö. Bilden återges med tillstånd. (Pippi goes on board).

Pippi as an image of pastoral

Lindgren understood well that children are powerless to effect social justice. Pippi often seems impervious to the disorder she proliferates, but she confronts injustice intuitively. And though she is an anarchic force, beneath the absurdity of her antics, embedded in her “lies,” are moral truths. For example, at Tommy and Annika’s mother’s coffee party, Pippi answers the women’s dismissive and derogatory complaints about their servants:

“If only my Rosa were clean,” one says, to which Pippi replies in an extensive fabrication of an invented Grandmother and servant, Malin, “Malin was so outrageously dirty that it was a joy to see her, Grandmother said.” When another “strongly suspect[s] that my Hulda steals,” Pippi asserts “Malin stole too /--/. She was very clever with her hands, Grandmother said.” As yet another claims, “my Ella /--/ break[s] the china,” Pippi retorts, as she is ushered out by children’s mother, “Speaking of Malin /--/ [s]he set apart one day a week just to break china /--/. There was such a crash bang in the kitchen all morning that it was a joy to hear it, Grandmother said” (Lindgren 1997b, 125–27). And even though Pippi recognizes the lies in all her tall tales, she concludes, “Oh, that was a lie, that’s true /--/. But still, if it’s true, how can it be a lie?” (Lindgren 1997b, 87)

In this early work, Lindgren has enormous fun debunking authority. Pippi’s father, the cannibal king in a grass skirt, coloured beads hanging from his neck, a gold crown on his head, and “a couple of fat, hairy legs [which] stuck out, with thick gold bracelets on the ankles” (Lindgren 1997a, 108), illustrates an absurd though kind authority figure. As he wrestles with Pippi, and Pippi shows herself stronger

and more resourceful, with great affection he says, “Do as you like. /--/ You always have done that /--/ ”. When Pippi asserts, “It’s surely best for little children to live an orderly life, especially if they can order it themselves”, he offers, “You are right, as always, my daughter” (Lindgren 1997a, 136–37). And from her anti-authority, anti-racist stance, Lindgren created the Kurrekurredutt native children who throw themselves on the ground to pay homage to Princess Pippilotta, while Pippi quickly gets down on her knees to “nose around on the ground”. When the children insist on bowing their heads to the ground again, Pippi asks, “Have you lost something? /--/ In any case it isn’t there, so you might as well get up” (Lindgren 1997b, 74).

However, no matter how Pippi challenges social institutions and customs, the real world does not change. She remains untouched, an image of pastoral. In contrast to her conventional friends Tommy and Annika, Pippi is the wild child, untamed and undifferentiated from nature. As a girl, Pippi is not especially female identified. While Tommy is consistently adventurous and hides his more tender feelings, and Annika, with her “lovely flaxen hair, pink dress, and little white kid shoes” (Lindgren 1997, 84), always needs protection and cries easily, Pippi remains full of surprises, a representation of primal desire. Firmly rooted in the “civilized” world, the two children seem aware of time and its association with loss, when they sing their summer song (in autumn), in an attempt to move beyond the sadness they sense:

Nobody’s sad, everyone’s gay.
You who are young,
Come join in our song.

Pippi, on the other hand, is timeless, focused only on her desire:

I do exactly as I wish
And when I walk it goes squish, squish . . .
For the shoe is wet.
The bull sleeps yet.
And I eat all the rice porridge I can get. (Lindgren 1997, 88)

Many aspects of Pippi’s anarchic behavior provide a satire that is inviting to children. Pippi’s confusion between theater and real life reminds us of her position as outsider. In *Pippi Goes on Board* (1946), when the Countess in the play bemoans, “I wish I were dead already”, Pippi bursts out, sobbing, “Please don’t talk like that! /--/

Things will be brighter for you. The children will find their way home, and you can always get another husband. There are so many me-e-en'" (Lindgren 1997a, 69). She jumps on the stage, grabs the villain, and throws him across the floor. However, in keeping with the socialized world, she desires "to be a fine lady". Or else, with one foot in the world of fantasy, she wants to become a pirate. Neither option can be realized for Pippi in the real world or sustained in fantasy, but, like the fool of the numbskull tale fishing for the moon he sees reflected in the lake, Pippi survives all her antics.

There are, however, two striking moments in which Pippi seems to recognize that, no matter how she resists growing up, time will catch up with her. She says, somewhat humorously, "'time flies and one begins to grow old. /--/ This autumn I'll be ten, and then I guess I'll have seen my best days'" (Lindgren 1997a, 105). And at the very end of the *Pippi* series, she sits "with her head propped against her arms. She was staring at the little flickering flame of a candle that was standing in front of her. She seemed to be dreaming. "'She – she looks so alone'", Annika notes, and though the children try to comfort themselves with thoughts of how she would always come back to Villa Villekulla, Lindgren leaves her readers in the darkness of the time-bound world as "Pippi continued to stare straight ahead with a dreamy look. Then she blew out the light" (Lindgren 1997b, 125). This poignant note returns us to the genesis of pastoral, to the nostalgia and longing of its origins. Perhaps it also points to the limits of pastoral and Lindgren's own deepening as a writer when, much later in her career, she considered childhood from another angle in writing *Ronia, the robber's daughter*.

Ronia – from dark to light pastoral

Ronia, the robber's daughter, the story of a girl who grows into a young woman, moves through time, and, therefore, is subject to the laws of nature, wildlife, and the changing seasons. But *Ronia, the robber's daughter* straddles both realms, the fantastic and the realistic. Lindgren adds imaginary creatures from the forests of dark pastoral – the gray dwarves, the rumphobs, and the harpies – as an antidote to the realism of Ronia's maturation. Again Lindgren's girl protagonist spans the mimetic and imaginary, but Ronia reverses Pippi's atemporality. Each archetypal task for Ronia is reflected in psychological terms, as her quest to mature focuses on the separation and individuation necessary for adolescent development. Ronia's emotional responses, as well as those of Matt and Lovis, her parents, are com-



© Lindgren, Astrid. *Ronja Rövardotter* III. Ilon Wikland. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1981 (Ronja, the robber's daughter).

plex. Her relationship with Birk, her “brother”, is a rich and developing, psychologically nuanced mutuality. It begins in antipathy and grows into the force that unites the fractured kingdom.

Ronja’s initial movement away from childhood begins as she learns that “the world’s bigger than Matt” (Lindgren 1983, 13). She has to see for herself how the river “came rushing in wild rapids from deep under Matt’s Mountain [to] underst[and] what rivers were. They had talked about the forest. But it was not until she saw it, so dark and mysterious, with all its rustling trees, that she understood what forests were /--/” (ibid, 13). And at night, she notices the stars, their distance, the world even larger, that there were things she could never reach. As she grows into awareness, she experiences fear and learns to acknowledge it and to practice living with it in order to overcome it. And, like all pastoral heroes, “in the end she was like a healthy little animal, strong and agile and afraid of nothing” (ibid, 17). But she also learns, as all heroes of *bildungsroman* must, gender differentiation, that she is a girl and will grow into a “Lovis,” while “the one who was sitting dangling his legs over Hell’s Gap would turn into a Matt” (ibid, 22).

Lindgren does not create a conventionally individualistic hero in Ronja. Rather she provides in this liminal fiction a paradigm for mu-

tuality. Whether in relationship to her Soulmate Birk, or to family, or community, or even nature, Ronia learns that she is a part of, not the center of all things. This, of course, doesn't determine that she subordinate her voice or her imagination. This model of mutuality insists upon letting go of control over others. It demands close observation, and compassion. Early in the novel, Birk tells her, "'Your fox cubs! Your woods! Fox cubs belong to themselves /--/ they live in the foxes' wood, which is the wolves' and bears' and elk's and wild horses' wood too'" (ibid, 39). She and Birk together learn about reciprocity from the injured mare that they save, who in turn actually nurses them so that they can survive their first withdrawal into the forest. Ronia learns that she is as dependent upon Birk for survival as he is on her. She saves him from slipping into the deep crevice of Hell's Gap, the symbol of the initial fracture of her father's domination of the forest. And Birk saves Ronia from two airborne dangers of the forest: the escapist call of the Unearthly Ones and the violent harpies. The fact that Ronia has no memory of the Unearthly Ones' voices, though she bites Birk viciously as he pulls her away, suggests that this knowledge, as with other unconscious knowing, is not readily acknowledged, that there is no final closure to this dark desire.

Lindgren also notes the painful parts of connection and deep bonding: that no matter how Ronia hates her father for his violence and for his inability to accept that he cannot control either his daughter or the forest – he is still "her Matt" and she loves him. Her climactic leap across to the enemy side of Hell's Gap, which further ruptures her bond with Matt, is necessary, glorious, a bold move; the fracture will heal with time. And her journey through the dungeon of the past suggests confronting such required changes, internally and externally, in order for new life to rise out of, rejuvenate, and replace the old order. In the harshness of the forest, the most powerful scenes, like her ambivalence toward her mother's visit where she both wishes to hear her mother's wolf song, to lie in her mother's arms, and escape from her, resonate from her deep and honest struggles with intimacy. And fighting with Birk evokes such pain: Ronia notes, "it hurt to be so furious and so desperate. There he stood, Birk, looking at her with ice-cold eyes, the same Birk she had been so close to /--/" (ibid, 143). Morality also resists simplicity: Ronia learns to lie and steal to survive, something that may not be imperative for Matt or for the rival robber gang of Borka. In fact, perhaps if Matt were more reasonable she wouldn't have had to betray him.

Ronia and her "brother" Birk are the healing forces here. They provide a return to the higher innocence of Blake's pastoral where

the two opposing robber gangs are unified. Further, Ronia and Birk renounce robbing as a way of life. They will live happily in relative harmony, spending summers, spring, and autumn in the forest, coming “home” for protection against the frozen world of winter, but they will not be taking from others. Questioning their parents’ world is the beginning of a more just vision for a new society. Although they will continue to live in nature, Lindgren suggests that they *will* enter the quotidian world. As *Ronia, the robber’s daughter* is essentially a romance, Lindgren does not have to solve the problem of *how* they do this. Nor will the reader have to witness the tedious struggles of the socialized world of *Pippi Longstocking*.

In a reversal of Pippi’s darkening ending, Ronia leaps ebulliently into spring at the end. From the pure pastoral of spring, which “was for everyone”, to the harsh dangers of winter, from the deep promise of love to the inevitability of death, the dark pastoral serves as a holding environment for the range of seasons, feelings, relationships, and largeness of the community which necessitates change and healing in order to flourish.

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