

## Annie Bourguignon

*From the conquest of the poles to the last days of mankind: polar expeditions and war, critical views by August Strindberg, Karl Kraus and Selma Lagerlöf*

### Abstract

*Polar expeditions were very popular everywhere between 1875 and 1914. Nevertheless, a few people voiced critical views. Towards the end of this period, nationalistic feelings increased continuously in all European countries. The First World War – at least at the beginning – found broad support in all countries. But there were a few exceptions, like August Strindberg and Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden, or Karl Kraus in Austria. That those three writers did not share the general appreciation of “the conquest of the North” either is worth consideration. Both Strindberg and Kraus made fun of Cook and Peary, who in 1909 argued, each by himself, that he was first at the North Pole. In Lagerlöf’s *The Outcast*, we find an upsetting image of an expedition towards the pole, which sheds light on its inhuman aspects. The last part of the article deals with possible connections between pacifism and critical views on polar explorations in the three authors’ works.*

### Résumé

Entre 1875 et 1914, les expéditions polaires sont partout populaires, mais quelques voix isolées s’interrogent sur les véritables motivations de ces voyages. A la fin de la période, le sentiment national s’accroît dans toute l’Europe. Pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, les pacifistes sont rares. Mais on trouve parmi eux August Strindberg et Selma Lagerlöf en Suède, Karl Kraus en Autriche, écrivains qui ont eu aussi une attitude critique face à la « conquête du Nord ». Strindberg juge sévèrement les explorateurs polaires mus par leur nationalisme, ou un désir de prestige. Strindberg et Kraus se moquent de Cook et Peary qui, en 1909, affirment chacun avoir été le premier à atteindre le Pôle Nord. *Le Banni*, de Lagerlöf, donne une image peu flatteuse d’un voyage vers le pôle, et en montre les aspects inhumains. La dernière partie de l’article aborde la question d’une éventuelle articulation entre pacifisme et circonspection face aux explorations polaires.

### Key-words

Polar Expeditions - Pacifism - Progress - Comparative Literature - Swedish Literature

### Mots-Clés

Expéditions polaires ; pacifisme, progrès ; littérature comparée ; littérature suédoise

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# From the conquest of the poles to the last days of mankind: polar expeditions and war, critical views by August Strindberg, Karl Kraus and Selma Lagerlöf

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Polar expeditions enjoyed what we may call a golden age between 1875 and 1914. Admired worldwide, it appears that their value was but rarely questioned. Nevertheless, a few people did question it and were critical of such ventures. I would like to deal with three such critics, who were very famous writers, namely the Swedes August Strindberg and Selma Lagerlöf and the Austrian publicist Karl Kraus.

The golden age of polar expeditions ended with the First World War – which found broad support everywhere, at least at the beginning. In Europe, amazingly few people were in favour of pacifism. In the neutral Scandinavian countries, the population often sided with one of the camps. Hardly more than ten to fifteen well-known European intellectuals openly opposed war, yet among them were Strindberg, Lagerlöf and Kraus.

Expressing such infrequent attitudes simultaneously was quite rare. Besides, pacifists were generally progressive-minded, whereas negative opinions on exploration travelling were regarded as conservative. In this paper, I shall first give a brief account of how pacifist positions were expressed by the three authors, before examining how they viewed polar expeditions. Those views cannot be said to be an immediate, logical result of pacifism, nor can pacifism be an immediate, logical result of a depreciative judgement on voyages to the poles. As far as I know, there has not been any extensive research on possible connections between the two issues. I shall only try to formulate some hypotheses, taking into account some important ideological debates of the time.

## Expressions of pacifism

Strindberg's rejection of war was constant, tolerating only military actions which was strictly defensive. In 1884, he wrote the famous pacifist short story "Samvetskval" ("Remorse", *The German Lieutenant*).<sup>1</sup> In 1899, in the article "August Strindberg's confession", a fictive interviewer asked the writer: "What reform of society do you wish most would happen in your lifetime?" and the answer was: "disarmament".<sup>2</sup> After 1901, though he could be expected to receive the Nobel prize for literature, he was rather striving for the prize for peace.<sup>3</sup> In the years before his death, pacifism was given more and more importance in his works and his life. He openly expressed his aversion to the Swedish king Charles XII and his conquering wars.<sup>4</sup> We may see an anticipated image of the First World War in his last drama *The Great Highway*, where stupidity allows and justifies cruelty and fanaticism. Strindberg died in 1912, but he was fully aware of the risk of war that was increasing rapidly after 1910.<sup>5</sup>

Selma Lagerlöf was still alive in 1914. Though her country did not take part in the war, she was emotionally shocked and reacted by deeply questioning the value of her previous literary work. In the late 1880s, she had begun reading Herbert Spencer and adopted his evolutionistic positivism as her own. For Spencer, the human being is the highest-ranking animal on the scale of evolution, and its evolution is moving towards the better. Thus, anything that favours human life is a good thing, whilst all that threatens it must be avoided. Militarism and war should disappear.<sup>6</sup> In the years immediately following

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<sup>1</sup> August Strindberg: "Samvetskval", in *Utopier i verkligheten, Samlade Verk* 19, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1990, p. 141-179.

<sup>2</sup> "August Strindbergs självbekännelse", in *Samlade Verk* 71, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2004, p. 207 : „Vilken samhällsreform skulle ni helst önska uppleva? Svar: Avväpningen“.

<sup>3</sup> August Strindberg, *Ockulta dagboken* in *Samlade Verk* 59:I Stockholm, Norstedts, 2012, p. 367, and *Samlade Verk* 60, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2012, p. 383.

<sup>4</sup> August Strindberg, "Sveriges förstörare", in *Samlade Verk* 68, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1988, p. 50-53.

<sup>5</sup> On Strindberg's pacifism, cf. my paper : Annie Bourguignon, "„...en andens stridsman som hatade vapenkrig'. Strindberg och den stundande världskriget", *Socialistisk Debatt* 203, 2012, p. 157-171.

<sup>6</sup> About Selma Lagerlöf and Herbert Spencer, see David Anthin, *Landskapets upplösning. En studie av landskapets och platsens betydelse i Selma Lagerlöfs roman Bannlyst*, Täby, Selma Lagerlöf-sällskapetets småskrifter, 2000, p. 21-22.

1914, Lagerlöf scarcely published anything. Then, she wrote a few poems and texts about the war. The most noteworthy of them is the 1918 pacifist novel *Bannlyst (The Outcast)*.

The story begins in the early 1910s at Applum, a small town on the west coast of Sweden. The main character, the young Sven Elversson, is rejected by the whole parish for once participating in a crime, a fact disclosed by minister Rhånge. However, following the outbreak of war and its devastating consequences, the minister understands that mass killing causes much more harm than Sven's seemingly repulsive act: war destroys life, the most sacred thing.

To convince her readers, Lagerlöf aims to bring about a strong emotional reaction, which in turn is expected to trigger a spontaneous rejection of massacres, whatever cause they may serve. She describes thousands of corpses floating on the water after the sea battles in the Skagerak in June 1916. Rhånge urges his parishioners to go and subject themselves to that sight and suffer a shock that would prevent them from feeling indifference.

As for Karl Kraus, between 1914 and 1918, he ceaselessly delivered lectures and wrote articles opposing the hostilities. He is the author of one of the most famous literary works about the First World War, *The Last Days of Mankind*, an extremely long play which stages a succession of real episodes of the war.<sup>7</sup> The grotesque situations often feel tragic, while tragedy looks grotesque. The close relationship between ridicule and calamity is reminiscent of *The Great Highway*, which is not a coincidence, for Kraus admired Strindberg.<sup>8</sup>

### Views on polar expeditions

Of the three writers, Strindberg is the one with the most elaborate judgement on polar expeditions. He is not openly hostile towards them. In particular, his admiration of Erik Adolf Nordenskiöld is evidently clear. Nordenskiöld is known as the first man who succeeded in sailing through the North-East Passage in 1879 in his ship, the *Vega*. Upon his return to Stockholm in 1880, Strindberg was introduced to him and took part in the organization of the exhibition showing the documents that were brought back by the *Vega*.<sup>9</sup>

Nordenskiöld was primarily a scientist in the eyes of Strindberg, who always points out the scholar's rigorous scientific thinking. He suggests that Nordenskiöld's voyage from Norway to Japan the northern way would not have been successful without meticulous preparations using extensive scientific knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

It seems Strindberg also had a rather positive opinion about the expedition of the engineer Salomon August Andrée, the aim of which was to reach the North Pole in a balloon. The expedition began in 1897, but the crew had to land the balloon on the pack-ice, which remained a long way from the pole, and perished. One of the participants in the expedition was Nils Strindberg, a relative of August. In *Inferno*, the latter writes: "the son of my first cousin is going to risk his life for a great scientific discovery".<sup>11</sup> He approves of Andrée's enterprise because he regards it as serving science.

When in Paris in the 1890s, Strindberg valued science all the more as he wanted to be recognized as a scientist himself. He produced theories that could not be supported by his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup> In *Antibarbarus II*, he considers the hypothesis that the earth might be flat, with an empty space in its centre, thus resembling a kind of ring of Saturn, but without planets around it.<sup>13</sup> In July 1894, a year after the departure of Fridtjof Nansen on his expedition to the North Pole on his ship, the *Fram*, and having received no news from him, Strindberg wrote to his friend Birger Mörner: "[I] took the earth as

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<sup>7</sup> Kraus began working on *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind)* in 1915. In the following years, he published some extracts from it in his review *Die Fackel*. The whole play appeared in 1922.

<sup>8</sup> See Thelma Hanson, *Karl Kraus och Strindberg*, Göteborg, Kungl. Vetenskaps- och Vitterhets-Samhället, 1996, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Bo Bennich-Björkman, *Strindberg och Nordenskiölds japanska bibliotek*, Stockholm, Acta Bibliothecæ Regiæ Stockholmiensis, 2007, p. 37-39.

<sup>10</sup> August Strindberg, "Uppträkar -Humbug", in *Samlade Verk* 68, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> August Strindberg, *Inferno*, in *Samlade Verk* 37, Stockholm, Norstedts, p. 104: « le fils de mon cousin germain qui va risquer la vie pour une grande découverte scientifique » (Strindberg's own French text).

<sup>12</sup> August Strindberg, *Samlade Verk* 36, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2003, p. 466-467.

<sup>13</sup> August Strindberg: *Samlade Verk* 35, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2010, p. 112-113.

the ring and its inner hole = the polar zones, so that Nansen [...], if he succeeds, can come out at the South Pole!”<sup>14</sup>

Those words might seem slightly bizarre, but they do not express any hostility towards the *Fram* expedition. After Nansen’s return, Strindberg’s judgement on him changed significantly. In the novel *Götiska rummen* (“The Gothic Chambers”), which came out in 1904, one of the characters says to a friend: “Do you know what the difference is between Sweden and Norway? Well, the same difference as between Nordenskiöld and Nansen. Nordenskiöld reached the Northeast Passage as he had planned, but he did not become a national hero; Nansen did not reach the North Pole as he had promised, but he became a national hero.”<sup>15</sup>

On October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1906, Strindberg wrote in his *Occult Diary*: “These days I have read Nansen’s voyage with the *Fram* the first time – an amusing book; the hero is bad-tempered and misses his home; poorly observed; we are not told anything about the sun, the moon, the stars, the northern lights, etc. [...] and [...] each bear they shoot is a big event”.<sup>16</sup>

That antipathy has something to do with Nansen’s nationality. His deeds in the Arctic have their political side. Seen through Strindberg’s eyes, this means instrumentalizing science. Strindberg would deal with that subject again a few years later, in the article “Upptäckar-Humbug” (“Discoverers’ Humbug”)<sup>17</sup>, once more opposing the researcher’s – i.e. Nordenskiöld’s – method and the thirst for national and personal prestige supposedly Nansen’s.<sup>18</sup>

The pamphlet was directed, among others, at polar explorers. In addition to Nansen, it deals with Frederick Cook and Robert Peary. In 1909, both asserted that they were the first man to reach the North Pole, and both were acclaimed everywhere. Strindberg expresses clear doubts about both. Their being acclaimed contrasts with the almost total lack of scientific proof. Peary, for instance, did not publish the page of his logbook from the day he is supposed to have reached the latitude of 90°; the highest spot mentioned on the published pages is located at approximately the same latitude as the polar circle. Instead, Peary shows a photograph of himself with President Theodore Roosevelt and states that the latter said: “I believe in you, Peary”.<sup>19</sup> As for Cook, he “came first, was acclaimed, doctored, telegraphed (by royals), but when he could not produce clear evidence, he was unmasked as a humbug”.<sup>20</sup>

Strindberg expresses aversion towards these men initially seeking fame, who, according to him, despised ordinary people and thought they could cheat easily. He points out the political function of their expeditions, and questions their prestigious image by bluntly stating facts – or rather the lack of established facts: “Did Cook or Peary take the North Pole? Some think that both did, others that neither did.”<sup>21</sup> And he concludes his article with a list of obvious truths:

Facts remain. 1° Someone who sets off to discover the North Pole and comes back without having reached it, has made a fiasco and has not discovered a pole. 2° The Pole is at a latitude of 90°, and someone who only reaches a latitude of 86° 14’ does not hold the record. [...] 7° Someone who defends a wrong thing is either a crook or an imbecile. Etc. infinitely!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450: “[Jag har] tagit jorden som ringen och dess inre hållighet = polartrakterna, så att [...] Nansen, om han lyckas, kan komma ut vid sydpolen!”

<sup>15</sup> August Strindberg, *Samlade Verk* 53, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2001, p. 206: ”Vet du vad det är för skillnad på Sverige och Norge? Jo, samma skillnad som mellan Nordenskiöld och Nansen. Nordenskiöld tog sin utfästade Nordostpassage, men blev icke nationalhjälte; Nansen tog icke sin utlovade nordpol, men blev nationalhjälte.”

<sup>16</sup> A. Strindberg, *Samlade Verk* 59:1, *op. cit.*, p. 467: ”Har i dessa dagar läst Nansens Resa med Fram för första gången – En kostlig bok ; hjälten är pjunkig och längtar hem ; illa observerat ; får ingenting veta om sol, måne, stjärnor, norrsken o.s.v. [...] och [...] varje björn de skjuter är en stor händelse .”

<sup>17</sup> First published in *Afton-Tidningen* 1910-07-18. In A. Strindberg, *Samlade Verk* 68, *op. cit.*, p. 125-129.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126: ”Jag tror på Er, Peary.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125: ”kom först, jubilerades, doktorerades, telegraferades (kungligt) men när han icke kunde visa klara papper, så avslöjades han som humbug”.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125: ”Har Cook eller Peary tagit Nordpolen? Några anse att båda ha gjort det, andra att ingen.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129: ”Fakta kvarstå. 1:o Den som reser ut för att upptäcka Nordpolen, och kommer tillbaka utan att ha nått den, han har gjort fiasco, och ingen pol upptäckt. 2:o Polen ligger på 90°, och den som bara kommer till 86° 14’ har icke tagit sitt rekord. 3:o Den som icke tagit sitt rekord, men låter fira sig som en sagoprins och nationalhjälte, den är en humbug. [...] 7:o Den som försvarar orätt sak är antingen en skojare eller ett dumhuvud. O.s.v. i oändlighet!”

A year before Strindberg (in September 1909), Karl Kraus had dedicated a long article to Cook and Peary, “Die Entdeckung des Nordpols” (“The discovery of the North Pole”)<sup>23</sup> in his review *Die Fackel*. Strindberg had subscribed to the review since 1906, but most of the time he did not even open it.<sup>24</sup> The pages of the issue containing “Die Entdeckung des Nordpols” are uncut.<sup>25</sup> It is almost certain that Strindberg did not read the article. Nevertheless, “Discoverer’s humbug” reminds us of Kraus’ judgement on “[t]he discovery or, as it also was called, the conquest of the North Pole”.<sup>26</sup> The tone is also similar, a combination of sarcastic irony and indignation. Kraus does not answer the question of whether Peary or Cook reached the pole. He also stresses the political side, not only of the expedition itself, but also of the public’s great interest and of the coverage by the media. In 1909, following rebellions of Chinese minorities in big cities in the USA, Christian women missionaries disappeared, and Kraus suggests ironically that an American’s arrival at the pole reassured the Western world and confirmed its superiority: “People began to feel brave again and to trust a Providence who, with the discovery of the North Pole obviously wanted to repair the damage caused to civilized mankind by the unpleasant discoveries of the same season.”<sup>27</sup>

Like Strindberg, Kraus pokes fun at the two men who were each “first at the North Pole”. He also points out the lack of scientific evidence. But he thinks most people believe in the information they eagerly wish to believe in: “People needed a discoverer of the North Pole, and there he was. Not for the world could the world have accepted that he was not”.<sup>28</sup>

We do not find any theoretical considerations on the exploration of the poles in Selma Lagerlöf’s writings, but her views on the issue are implicitly expressed in her novel *The Outcast*.

The interesting point for my subject is not the offence Sven Elversson committed, but its circumstances. Scholarly studies seem to have paid but little attention to them. Sven was the son of poor peasants who lived on an island off Applum. At the age of nine, he was adopted by a wealthy British couple who promised his parents that they would make him their heir. After he left, nobody in Sweden heard from him. Seventeen years later, he came back to the island, for he had been compelled to leave England. The reason was that he participated in a polar expedition that lost its ship and had to winter in extremely harsh conditions. The crew suffered terribly from hunger; following the suicide of one member, the others could no longer resist and ate parts of his body. When the people of Applum learned what had happened, nobody wanted to have anything more to do with Sven, and he was rejected from society.

The story of the polar explorers is told in the first chapter of the novel. The Swedish father, already informed of the son’s situation by the minister, explains it to the mother who, like the reader, does not know anything. He first mentions a newspaper article. “The husband, who had been telling her about all the dangers and dreads endured by an English expedition to the North Pole that had returned home recently, interrupted himself in the middle of a sentence.”<sup>29</sup> The father thinks his wife is not listening, but she repeats what he has just said, “that they were forced to build snow-houses, and that they had to remain up there into the second year, so that they ran out of food and ended up chewing leather straps”<sup>30</sup>. From the very beginning, polar expeditions were associated with dread and suffering. Moreover, Thala, the mother, does not feel much compassion for the men on the pack-ice. The text reads: “And now they

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<sup>23</sup> *Die Fackel* 287, p. 1-14.

<sup>24</sup> T. Hanson: *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Erik Höök, the Director of the Strindberg Museum in Stockholm, for this information.

<sup>26</sup> *Die Fackel*, *op. cit.*, p. 1: „Die Entdeckung, oder wie sie auch genannt wurde, Eroberung des Nordpols“.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1: „man begann wieder Mut zu fassen und einer Vorsehung zu vertrauen, die durch die Entdeckung des Nordpols die zivilisierte Menschheit offensichtlich für die unerfreulichen Entdeckungen derselben Saison entschädigen wollte.“

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4: „Man brauchte einen Nordpolentdecker, und er war da. Um keinen Preis der Welt hätte sich die Welt ihn ausreden lassen“.

<sup>29</sup> Selma Lagerlöf, *Bannlyst*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1918, p. 9: ”männen, som hade hållit på att berätta för henne om alla de faror och fasor, som en nyligen hemkommen engelsk nordpolsexpedition hade fått utstå, avbröt sig mitt i en mening”.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10: ”att de fick lov att bygga sig snöhus, och att de måste ligga kvar där uppe in på andra året, så att det blev slut på maten för dem, och till sist låg de och tuggade på skinnremmar”.

will experience nothing but honour glory and happiness every day of their lives', the wife concluded. She could not see how this was something to grieve over."<sup>31</sup>

When she hears that their son participated in the expedition, Thala is torn between pride and remorse. Then, she learns that Sven and his companions were celebrated and acclaimed by millions of people when they returned to London, but were subsequently rejected by everybody: "On Monday, they could hardly move forward in the streets because of all those who wanted to see them, on Tuesday people certainly wanted to kick them and beat them."<sup>32</sup>

The act of cannibalism that originates in the polar expedition is the central theme that ties the plot together; it also serves the pacifist intention by spontaneously provoking disgust, a feeling that the author suggests applies to the war. Besides, the text itself never expresses the slightest admiration towards polar expeditions; in fact, such admiration is rather ridiculed by the reports of the crowds which acclaimed the explorers on Monday and cursed them on Tuesday.

The war substituted failing to respect life for failing to respect death as the most loathsome crime. But this also means that the latter, as illustrated by the polar story, was the worst thing people could imagine before the mass killing began.

### **What could be (a) possible connection(s) between the two stances?**

In *The Outcast*, polar exploration and war are considered in one work. Those issues are tied by the narrative thread. But we can easily make out an ideological coherence in the rejection of both: Lagerlöf stresses the brutality inherent in hazardous voyages. She reminds us that around 1900 there were no polar expeditions that did not result in deaths, and that initiating or supporting them meant accepting great suffering that could be avoided. Those expeditions did not cause as many victims as wars, but they also killed humans. They threatened human life and were inconsistent with Lagerlöf's Spencerian evolutionistic positivism.

We do not find such an obvious connection between pacifism and critical views on polar exploration in Strindberg's and Kraus' thought. Neither ever adopted one particular philosophical system totally as their own (nor did Lagerlöf). But all three responded to the main debates that dominated their time, either by partly supporting them or by attacking them. For that reason, it is not irrelevant, I think, to read their texts in the ideological context of the decades before and after 1900. I shall approach a limited part of the subject and consider two notions which were intensely debated in those days, and correlated with polar expeditions and war, namely nation and progress.

At the turn of the century, we find, two antagonistic ideas of the nation. One is the "social contract", with the State as an expression of the general will and an embodiment of the common interest of free individuals. The other regards the nation as a living body produced by a kind of natural evolution; the latter representation is in the first place a transposition of Darwin's theory to human societies. "The 'biological' view of the State"<sup>33</sup> is defended by Rudolf Kjellén<sup>34</sup>, a Swede, who was, together with his German disciple Johann Plenge, one of the main representatives of "the ideas of 1914", as opposed to "the ideas of 1789". In their evolutionary perspective, war is a necessary evil which transforms states, and cannot be avoided. One of its merits is also to weld the national community and to foster such virtues as courage and tenacity. Whereas Darwin's theory was used by Spencer to promote the conception of mankind as a whole, Kjellén refers to the very same theory to assert the existence of distinct human groups, naturally fighting each other.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11: "Och nu blir det bara heder och ära och lycka för dem i alla deras livsdagar", avslutade hustrun. Hon kunde inte tycka, att allt detta var något att sörja över".

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18: "På måndagen kunde de knappt komma fram på gatorna för alla, som ville se dem, på tisdagen ville man visst både sparka och slå dem."

<sup>33</sup> Rudolf Kjellén, *Världskrigets politiska problem*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1915, p. 10: "den 'biologiska' statsåskådningen". (Quotation marks in the original.)

<sup>34</sup> The Swedish professor Rudolf Kjellén coined the phrase "the ideas of 1914". His main work, "The Ideas of 1914. A Perspective on World History", was never published in Sweden. It appeared in 1915 at Leipzig in Carl Koch's translation: *Die Ideen von 1914. Eine weltgeschichtliche Perspektive*.

As for the idea of progress, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word<sup>35</sup> is both used in a general sense and applied to specific fields. In the latter case, it means a practical improvement everyone can see. In the former case, the term refers to a notion we associate with the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Enlightenment.<sup>36</sup> It means a constant increase of mankind's capacities, producing more knowledge, more techniques, better morals and more human societies, with all these different aspects of progress closely related through their common origin in rational thinking and in the firm belief "that increased knowledge will also contribute to the moral progress of mankind".<sup>37</sup> Such views were called "The Myth of Progress" by the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright.

In the wake of the idea of an absolute Progress that would inevitably happen, different counter-ideologies appeared. The most noticeable is its symmetrical opposite, "decadentism", for which improvements in material life and democratization of society could not but lead to decline, of culture, of the nation, of mankind.<sup>38</sup>

It is easy to see that Progress has an irrational side, for rational thinking alone is not able to prove that reason is almighty. As von Wright points out: "If the idea of modernity implies that there are no objective measures of goodness, values, then, for an enlightened thinking, the belief in progress is only an article of faith."<sup>39</sup> But on the other hand, "[p]recisely as there exists a climate of opinion that expresses belief in progress, there exists one that believes in regression".<sup>40</sup>

As consistent pacifists, the three authors could not but disagree with views on the nation which regarded war as necessary, and with nationalism, which accepted war. But in those days, polar expeditions did have an unquestionably nationalistic dimension, which they clearly perceived and pointed out. Johann Plenge, one of the foremost representatives of the "ideas of 1914", thought that the war resulted from "the exacerbated conflicts between the big powers [...], which were fighting for the last parts of our earth still to be dominated".<sup>41</sup> That sentence reminds us of Kraus paying attention to the not so rare phrase "conquest of the pole". There was no economic profit to be drawn from the poles, but they gave prestige and strengthened national feelings. That was clearly visible in the case of Sweden and Norway. At a time when their political relationship deteriorated, they engaged in a competition for polar territories. The three pacifists disapproved of the conquest of "the last parts of our earth" for the very reason why Plenge approved of it. One could object that the rush to the poles was a form of struggle that was less murderous than armed hostilities – though it did make victims – and that it might help prevent them. But Kraus, Strindberg and Lagerlöf rather thought it boosted nationalism. They described huge crowds acclaiming polar explorers and the mass media portraying them as heroes. Their popularity could forecast the state of mind that would make war possible.

Decadentists could be expected to disapprove of "the conquest of the poles", because in their eyes it was part of the dubious so-called "Progress", which was bound to bring about regression. And while they could explain the war that broke out in 1914 as a sign and a result of general decline, those who blindly believed in Progress must have been shocked by it, and even more by its violence and unprecedented devastations, which hardly anyone had anticipated. But the authors we are dealing with were not decadentists, nor did they have Progress as an article of faith.

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<sup>35</sup> When analyzing that notion, I mainly use Pierre-André Taguieff, *Le sens du progrès. Une approche historique et philosophique*, Paris, Flammarion, 2004; Jacques Bouveresse, *Le mythe moderne du progrès. La critique de Karl Kraus, de Robert Musil, de George Orwell, de Ludwig Wittgenstein et de Georg Henrik von Wright*, Marseille, Agone, 2017; and principally Georg Henrik von Wright, *Myten om framsteget*, Helsinki, Söderström, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> G. H. v. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 19: "att ökad kunskap också kommer att bidra till mänsklighetens moraliska framsteg".

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35: "Om det ligger i modernitetens idé att det inte finns några objektiva mått på godhet, värden, då är tron på framsteget enligt ett upplyst sätt att tänka bara en trosartikel."

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35: "Precis som det existerar ett åsiktsklimat som uttrycker tro på framsteg, så finns det ett som tror på tillbakagång."

<sup>41</sup> Johann Plenge, *1789 und 1914. Die symbolischen Jahre in der Geschichte des politischen Geistes*, Berlin, Verlag Julius Springer, 1916, p. 63: „aus den gesteigerten Gegensätzen der um die letzten Anteile an der Herrschaft über unsere Erde kämpfenden Großmächte des Hochkapitalismus“.

Before 1914, Lagerlöf was rather an optimist. In her works, good always conquered evil in the long run. Nevertheless, she did not think humans and society could change quickly and dramatically and she stated that trying to do so was destructive. For her, progress was a growing process similar to the growth of plants. In chapter LII of *Nils Holgersson*, a man is given a magical ring that is supposed to make him almost almighty. At first, he tests it and hangs it on the branch of an oak-tree. The tree begins to grow unbelievably quickly and becomes extraordinarily big. But very soon, its leaves turn yellow and fall. After a while, only a stump remains. The man is wise and throws away the ring. Of course, it would provide him with supernatural abilities and make him superior to others, “but it would urge him to efforts beyond measure, and it would be the end of his skills and his happiness”.<sup>42</sup> Lagerlöf opposes fierce ambition and hubris. The progress she believes in is modelled on trees which slowly grow. Many polar expeditions are an expression of hubris, and war even more so. In *The Outcast*, she compares what is happening in Europe with the *Apocalypse*, through the character of Lotta Hedman, a visionary woman, who declares:

For I know when the big war will end, and I know that after that the big devastation of nature will come, and I know that after the big devastation of nature the Blessed Millennium will come. And I know that one third of all humans will die in the big war, and that one third will perish in the big devastation of nature, but the last third will continue to live in the thousand-year reign of the Lord.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Lagerlöf sticks to the chronology of the Biblical text, allowing God to remain almighty and humans to keep hoping.

Strindberg and Kraus were opposed to war, but contrary to Lagerlöf, they feared it could happen. Kraus was sceptical of the idea of Progress – but did not believe in inevitable decadence. His views were somehow in opposition to the notion of an overall Progress.<sup>44</sup> But he regarded changes favouring more equality and justice as advisable, though he doubted if they could be carried out practically. He was afraid of techniques resulting from increased scientific knowledge, and of the unconsidered way they were used – an apprehension that in his eyes was confirmed by the First World War

Strindberg did not condemn such techniques as vehemently as Kraus. He had an obvious passion for science. For him, science was not at all a means of gaining material benefits, it was a search for knowledge for its own sake. It had to be allowed total freedom. That freedom could only be admitted if practical applications of scientific theories were strictly limited and controlled. The idea of free scientific research, together with a conviction that it must be allowed to question every kind of established knowledge, because knowledge was never certain, explains the odd hypotheses conjectured by Strindberg, such as the one concerning the shape of the earth. The tale “The triumphator and the fool”, from 1903, illustrates Strindberg’s conception of science. The text presents Nordenskiöld after his return on the Vega in 1880. He was invited to the University of Uppsala, where students performed a satirical play, making fun of the expedition that had just been successful. The explorer thanked the students for having laughed at him and prevented him from overestimating himself. They reminded him, he says, “that I am only a human being!”<sup>45</sup> The tale explains why Strindberg was critical of most polar voyages and expresses his slightly paradoxical understanding of progress: Trust in science is combined with a never vanishing awareness that human power is limited, both in the field of knowledge and when morals and character are concerned. Such limits are ignored by the stupid figures of *The Great Highway*. In the grotesque scene “At Eselsdorf”, scientific-looking trains of thought are misused by “donkeys” to serve their thirst for power. This makes them dangerous.

On the dangerousness of stupidity, Strindberg and Kraus had similar views. For them, it was not only a lack of intellectual sharpness, it was also, maybe primarily, a refusal to admit facts one does not like, or to admit one’s own ignorance. In 1909 Kraus wrote in the conclusion of his article on the North Pole:

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<sup>42</sup> Selma Lagerlöf, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige*, Stockholm, Bonniers, 1981, p. 576: ”Men den skulle komma honom att förta sig, så att det inom kort vore slut med hans duglighet och lycka.”

<sup>43</sup> S. Lagerlöf, *Bannlyst*, *op. cit.*, p. 138: ”För jag vet när storkriget ska sluta, och jag vet, att efter det ska komma den stora naturförödelsen, och jag vet, att efter den stora naturförödelse ska det komma det ljuvliga tusenårsriket. Och jag vet, att en tredjedel av alla människor ska omkomma i storkriget, och att en tredjedel ska förgås i den stora naturförödelsen, men den sista tredjedelen ska leva kvar i Herrans tusenårsrike.”

<sup>44</sup> J. Bouveresse, *op. cit.*, p. 39-40.

<sup>45</sup> August Strindberg, *Samlade Verk* 52, Stockholm, Norstedts, 1994, p. 141: ”att jag blott är en människa!”



Many centuries long, the human spirit had fought its way through night and fog in hopeless wrestling with the murderous natural powers of stupidity. [...] The imagination has not won a foot from the realm of that white death, from that place where even hope disappeared to transform the world of human powers into a realm of reason [...] For it was stupidity that had reached the North Pole, and its banner was flapping victoriously, a sign that it possessed the world.<sup>46</sup>

Like Lagerlöf, Kraus uses the *Apocalypse* to describe the war. The “epilogue” of *The Last Days of Mankind* revives its main motifs. But while the Bible prophesies that after the Last Judgement the New Jerusalem will come and those found worthy of it will live there in eternal happiness, in Kraus’ text (contrary to Lagerlöf’s) the annihilation of mankind is final. After “a long silence”, the play ends with: “God’s voice/ I did not want that.”<sup>47</sup> By developing its scientific techniques, mankind had become more powerful than God – but only to bring about its own destruction.

The ideological debates at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should not be reduced to a mere opposition between warmongering chauvinists hostile towards progress and pacifist-minded intellectuals who believed in Progress. My brief survey of possible correlations between pacifism and critical views on polar expeditions, which demands further research, deals with writers who opposed nationalism and accepted the idea of progress, but within certain limits, such as the human propensity for hubris or the unreliability of knowledge. The authors’ texts show, I think, that the “myth of Progress” was already being questioned at that time – not only by repudiation of the very possibility of progress, but also by what we might call a deconstruction of that myth, a process of splitting. Taking the place of the overall Progress as an article of faith, different categories of progress were being considered, such as scientific, moral, and political progress, that were no longer tightly associated with one another, and that could even be antagonistic.

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<sup>46</sup> *Die Fackel*, op. cit., p. 13-14: „Jahrhunderte lang war durch Nacht und Nebel der menschliche Geist gedrungen, in hoffnungslosem Ringen mit den mörderischen Naturgewalten der Dummheit. [...] Nicht einen Fußbreit hat Phantasie dem Reich jenes weißen Todes abgewonnen, dort, wo selbst die Hoffnung versank, die Welt der menschlichen Gewalten in ein Vernunftreich zu verwandeln. [...] Denn die Dummheit war es, die den Nordpol erreicht hatte, und sieghaft flatterte ihr Banner als Zeichen, daß ihr die Welt gehörte.“

<sup>47</sup> Karl Kraus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, Jazzybee Verlag, Altenmünster, 2016, p. 606: „Die Stimme Gottes/ Ich habe es nicht gewollt.“

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