

The wonderful and winding journeys of Nils Holgersson in Spain

Ingela Johansson
Centre for Languages and Literature
University of Lund (Sweden)
ingela.johansson@rom.lu.se

Henrik Rahm
Centre for Languages and Literature
University of Karlstad (Sweden)
henrik.rahm@kau.se

Carmen Sanchidrián Blanco
Department of Theory and History of Education
University of Málaga (Spain)
sanchidrian@uma.es

ABSTRACT: Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1906–1907), originally a Swedish geography textbook, became a literary classic translated into 60 languages. This study explores its Spanish translations from 1921 and 1982, and focuses on the book's reception in Spain. Which role did it come to play in the new context? Based on press material from 1905–1985, it finds that the book appeared in Spanish media as early as 1910, following Lagerlöf's Nobel Prize. Spanish critics, influenced by French cultural authorities, praised its imagination more than its educational intent. In the 1980s, the story resurfaced through a TV adaptation, prompting new interest. The study highlights how the work has transcended its original educational context.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Selma Lagerlöf; Children's Literature and Education; Educational Transfers and Translations; Spain; XX Century.

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a mean teenager in a country far away in the north who was transformed into a pixie and travelled around on the back of a goose, learning about geography, history, culture, and, not least, about the essence of being human. This is a way to summarize *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*¹ [*Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom*] (Sverige, 1906-1907), written by Selma Lagerlöf. The first four words are the same as in fairy tales and this is the way the book begins: «Det var en gång en pojke» [Once upon a time there was a boy]. Does this mean that the book is a fairy tale? It could be read in that way, at least the first chapter. But since it is a book of about 500 pages it would be impossible to read and listen to it in the same way as the folktales collected by the Brothers Grimm, stories to be listened to in full length without interruptions.

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils is well known as a story. Today we primarily think of it as an example of Selma Lagerlöf's art of storytelling. However, the process of its coming into being is more complex than that. Originally, the book was commissioned by Sweden's General Public-School Teachers' Association in 1901 for the Swedish schools to be used as a textbook of Swedish geography and Swedish (both Swedish language and Swedish literature). For decades the book was used in this double sense in Swedish primary schools.

Thus, we could add «textbook of Swedish» and «of Swedish geography» to the list of possible labels for the book. The literary quality is undisputed as Selma Lagerlöf was one of the leading authors around 1900. She was the first woman to obtain the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1909 and the first woman to become member of the Swedish Academy five years later. There are translations to various languages of the book, and it has also appeared in numerous shortened and illustrated editions over the years.

The multifaceted ways of reading and labelling *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* is the point of departure for a research project² with the aim to examine and compare Selma Lagerlöf's influence in education, pedagogy and literature in Sweden, Spain, and Greece, taking as a point of departure *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. The research questions are:

1. In what ways and for what purposes is *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* used in education, pedagogy and literature in Sweden, Spain, and Greece?

¹ In what follows, we will use the established English translation of the title, *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, or the shortened version *Nils Holgersson*.

² Project on the influence of Selma Lagerlöf's book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* on education and culture in Sweden, Spain and Greece. Participants: Henrik Rahm (Karlstad University), Ingela Johansson and Marianna Smaragdi (Lund University), and Carmen Sanchidrián (Málaga University).

2. What role does Selma Lagerlöf's work play in education, pedagogy, and literature in Sweden, Spain, and Greece?
3. What are the challenges for translations of Lagerlöf's works such as themes, specific Swedish phenomena, or Swedish culture?
4. Which thoughts and ideologies from Lagerlöf's works are expressed in translations as well as in discourses about education, pedagogy, and literature?

The research team belongs to four disciplines – Spanish literature, History of Education, Swedish linguistics and Modern Greek – and has an integrated competence in analyzing how ideas and words travel between languages and culture. The aim of this article is to present the results related to Spain. We have focused on research question 1 and 4.

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils became the first in the series Reading books for Sweden's childhood schools at Albert Bonnier's publishing house. It was published in new editions until 1973, with a total of more than 500,000 copies. The book quickly spread internationally and has been translated into some sixty languages. *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* was first translated into Spanish in 1921, but Lagerlöf was a prominent author in Spain before that, a prominence which of course increased after she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1909 and five years elected to the Swedish Academy. The close cultural connection between Spain and France at the turn of the last century and the fact that French was the first foreign language in Spanish textbooks makes it reasonable to assume that Lagerlöf was well known in Spanish intellectual circles because of translations of her works into French as early as 1903. The same would apply to Greece where French was first foreign language from 1832 to 1945, and in some regions until 1997. It was only in 1976, two years after the restoration of democracy in Greece, that *dimotiki* (the modern Greek language variant) began to be used in schools. During the military dictatorship, and even before, the archaic and artificial language form *katharevousa* had been used both in official contexts and in the school system. It is therefore interesting to see if the same kind of radical orthography as in the Swedish original text are reflected in the Greek translation.

There are examples of international publications about Selma Lagerlöf³,

³ See, among others, L. Vinge (ed.), *Selma Lagerlöf Seen from Abroad/Selma Lagerlöf i utlandsperspektiv*, Stockholm, Almqvist och Wiksell, 1998; M.L. Blanco Gómez, *Selma Lagerlöf: la maestra que se convirtió en escritora Nobel*, in P. Martino-Alba, M.L. Blanco-Gómez (edd.), *Mujeres Extraordinarias: Pinceladas Literarias Sobre Fémimas Premio Nobel*, Madrid, Dykinson, 2020, pp. 57-76; H. Forsås-Scott, L. Stenberg, B.T. Thomsen (edd.), *Re-mapping Lagerlöf: performance, intermediality and European transmissions[e-book]*, Sweden, Nordic Academic Press, 2014; J. Bergenmar, *Between Värmland and the world A comparative reception history of Selma Lagerlöf*, in Y. Leffler, Å. Arping, J. Bergenmar, G. Hermansson, B.J. Lindh (edd.), *Swedish women's writing on export: tracing transnational reception in the nineteenth*

and there are also specific studies on Lagerlöf's influence in some countries⁴. She has received, of course, greater attention in the Nordic countries⁵. Taking all this into account, this article analyzes her presence in Spain beyond the years of her Nobel Prize reception. Given that her main work was a book designed for schools, and therefore with academic and moral content, the study of Lagerlöf and her work is relevant to the history of children's literature and education. This study looks at Lagerlöf's presence in Spain through the translations of *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* and her presence in the daily press.

1. Sweden 1900 – democracy, education, orthography and literature at stake

With regards to education, Sweden was one of the forerunners in Europe, introducing compulsory school of two years in 1842. From 1842 to 1900 the literacy rate rose from 20-40% to almost 100%⁶. However, Sweden was late

century, Göteborg, University of Gothenburg, Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, 2019, pp. 263-320.

⁴ As a non-exhaustive list see, E.C. Mebius, *Vita & Selma: A Note on the Reception of Selma Lagerlöf in the English-Speaking World*, «Notes and Queries», vol. 69, n. 2, 2022, pp. 165–168; E.C. Mebius, *Leonard Woolf on Selma Lagerlöf's Mårbacka: the reception of Lagerlöf in the English-Speaking World, Part II*, «Notes and Queries», vol. 70, n. 2, 2023, pp. 119-120; P. Graves, *The Reception of Selma Lagerlöf in Britain*, in A.S. Bondesson, *Italy seen from Sweden and Sweden seen from Italy: Selma Lagerlöf's Sicilian novel and Italian translations*, «Scandinavian Studies», vol. 83, n. 2, 2011, pp. 233-246; J. Watson, *Scandinavian Literature in Nazi Germany: Selma Lagerlöf as One Example*, «Scandinavian Studies», vol. 61, n. 4, 2019, pp. 482-499; J. Watson, *Swedish Novelist Selma Lagerlöf, 1858-1940, and Germany at the Turn of the Century: O Du Stern Ob Meinem Garten*, Edwin Mellen Pr, 2004; I. Desmidt, «Jetzt bist du in Deutschland, Däumling». Nils Holgersson on Foreign Soil – Subject to New Norms, «Forskningssoutput: Tidskriftsbidrag, MetaJournal des traducteurs = translators' journal», vol. 48, n. 1-2, 2003, pp. 165-181.

⁵ For example, see A. Nyblom, *Varumärket Selma Lagerlöf: Jubileet som populärhistoriskt mediasystem 1900/2000*, «Historisk Tidskrift för Finland», vol. 95, n. 1, 2010, pp. 70-91; C. Axell, J. Hallström *Technology and the shaping of a Swedish national identity in the educational work of Selma Lagerlöf, 1900-1907*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», vol. X, n. 1, 2015, pp. 299-316; D. Lindmark, *Learning to write the right learning. The ideological function of copies in writing instruction in 19th-century Sweden*, in J. Meda, R. Sani, D. Montino (edd.), *School exercise books: a complex source for a history of the approach to schooling and education in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Firenze, Polistampa, 2010, Vol. 2, pp. 1441-1450; J. Evertsson, *Materiality, Wallcharts, and Educational Change in Sweden from the Mid-Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century*, «Nordic Journal of Educational History», vol. 9, n. 1, 2022, pp. 27-59.

⁶ J. Westberg, *Att bygga ett skolväsende. Folkskolans förutsättningar och framväxt 1840–1900 [e-book]*, Nordic Academic Press, 2014, p. 21.

in introducing political democracy, granting the right of voting for men in 1909, and universal suffrage as late as in 1921.

The new textbook, commissioned by Sweden's General Public-School Teachers' Association, should replace or in any case supplement the criticized *Primary School Reading Book* [*Läsebok för folkskolan*] which was published in its first edition as early as 1868. One criticism of the *Primary School Reading Book* was that it contained widely separated texts that did not create a context. In addition, with its request, Sweden's General Public School Teachers' Association wanted to create not only a reading book but also a textbook in Swedish geography. One of the members of this association was Fridtjuf Berg. In 1905 he became minister of ecclesiastical affairs with responsibility for the Lutheran state church and the schools. He made sure that the book was introduced into the schools and in 1906 carried out the last (and maybe last?) major spelling reform in Swedish through an ordinance, or Royal Circular, as ordinances were called in this pre-democratic era in Sweden. This reform simplified the spelling: several consonants together were now written with only one, spelling was unified for the same sounds, and verbs were now written in a unified form without distinguishing between person and number. The v-sound would be spelled uniformly instead of the previous initial hv-, medial -fv-, and final -f and that the t-sound would be written with -t or -tt final instead of -dt. Linguistically interesting is that Adolf Noreen, professor of Nordic languages in Uppsala and ardent advocate of radical new spelling, was Selma Lagerlöf's language expert and language expert in the work on *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (Callin 2014). Selma Lagerlöf (with the support and advice of Adolf Noreen) wrote the book in accordance with the spelling reform and also wrote the verbs throughout with singular forms [*de får* and *de fick* instead of *de få* and *de fingo*] [our translation from Swedish]⁷.

The fact that the book was written following the new rules, combined with the fact that it was both a reading and geography book, makes it extremely important in the history of Swedish education. The spelling reform coincided with the publication of *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, and it became a kind of revolution for school education. The language used in the book was considered very modern and very different. The reception was mixed. We do not know exactly how the 1906 spelling reform took root, but there seems to be a generational divide among those born in the mid-1890s. They seem to have adopted the new spelling, unlike previous generations. And with each new cohort that perceived the new spelling as natural, public support grew⁸.

Nils Holgersson became the first in the series Reading books for Sweden's

⁷ L. Alfvegren, *Adolf Noreen och Selma Lagerlöf*, «Språk och stil», n. 2, N.F., pp. 33-41, <<https://libris.kb.se/bib/9265453>> (last access: 15.12.2025).

⁸ M. Callin, *Det stavas revolution!*, «Språktidningen», 14.8.2016, <<https://spraktidningen.se/artiklar/det-stavas-revolution/>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

childhood schools at Albert Bonnier's publishing house⁹. In 1921 Selma Lagerlöf condensed the two volumes into one volume. It was published in new editions until 1973, in total more than 500,000 copies.

2. Nils Holgersson in Spain. Translations

The wonderful adventures of Nils was translated twice into Spanish. The first translation was published 15 years after the book's original publication in Sweden, in 1921¹⁰, and is notable for being translated directly from Swedish, rather than indirectly via German, as was the case with works written by other Swedish authors such as Ellen Key. The translator, Carlos Antonio de Talavera Björnberg (1853-1942), was bilingual, with a Spanish father and a Swedish-Finnish mother. Alongside his name, with a somewhat unclear role, the name Vicente Clavel also appears. Clavel, the founder of the Cervantes publishing house, likely facilitated both the translation and the publishing process.

In the prologue to the 1921 translation, Talavera provides a brief biography of Selma Lagerlöf, including her most prominent works, and adds *Nils Holgersson* to the list:

We do not hesitate to call this book the *Don Quixote* of Swedish children. It constitutes a family epic, picturesque, instructive, and moving. It is written with such a grace of colouring and such noble intent that it justifies that after its publication, Selma Lagerlöf was elected member of the Swedish Academy and awarded the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1909¹¹.

Talavera's translation is undoubtedly the most widely circulated Spanish version of the book, and it has also served as the basis for many abridged versions of *Nils Holgersson*.

Nils Holgersson was retranslated 61 years later by Matilde Goulard de

⁹ In 1898, Ellen Key criticised the first book in «Ord och Bild», saying that it was «a national disaster», and in a letter to Selma Lagerlöf, she wrote, «Thank you for attacking the old textbook! It was undoubtedly born under the star of boredom». L. Lindblom, *Ellen Key & Selma Lagerlöf: breven*, Stockholm, Första upplagan, Blue Publishing, 2022, p. 42.

¹⁰ S. Lagerlöf, *El maravilloso viaje de Nils Holgersson a través de Suecia*, Trad. de Carlos Antonio Talavera Björnberg, Barcelona, Editorial Cervantes, 1921.

¹¹ The Spanish texts have been translated by us and they appear herein as footnotes: [No vacilamos en llamar este libro el Quijote de los niños suecos. Constituye una epopeya familiar, pintoresca, instructiva y conmovedora. Está escrito con tal gracia de colorido y tan noble finalidad, que justifica que tras su publicación fuera elegida Selma Lagerlöf miembro de la Academia y se la designaba para el premio Nobel de Literatura, que se le concedió en 1909]. C.A. Talavera Björnberg, *Prólogo*, in S. Lagerlöf, *El maravilloso viaje de Nils Holgerssons a través de Suecia*, Barcelona, Editorial Cervantes, 1921, p. 7.

Westberg¹². While little is known about Talavera's life, we have more insights into Goulard's biography. She was born into a progressive Spanish family, attended la *Institución Libre de Enseñanza* in Madrid¹³, and was sent to Stockholm by the Spanish Junta de Relaciones Culturales in 1938. There, she began working as a foreign lecturer. When the position was withdrawn, in 1939, Goulard decided to stay in Sweden, because of the political turmoil in Spain and Franco's rise to power. In 1942, she obtained a position at the newly founded Ibero-American Institute in Gothenburg and later held positions as a teacher at the Gothenburg School of Business, Economics and Law, as well as the University of Gothenburg¹⁴. Goulard translated Spanish language poetry, notably Juan Ramón Jiménez (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1956), into Swedish, and Swedish poetry into Spanish (among others, Pär Lagerkvist, Hjalmar Gullberg, and Karin Boye) in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1982, she published a new translation of *Nils Holgersson* into Spanish¹⁵.

In a comparative study, Kure-Bonne¹⁶ concludes that in his translation of *The wonderful adventures of Nils*, Talavera followed the general tendency of his time toward domestication. This implies making the text as understandable as possible for the reader in the new cultural context, making it similar to a text written originally in the target culture. In this process, the translator takes liberties, for example omitting passages or translating toponyms to the target language. On the other hand, Goulard's more recent version aligns with the foreignizing trend, which is more common in modern translations. Apply-

¹² S. Lagerlöf, *El maravilloso viaje de Nils Holgersson a través de Suecia*; transl. by Matilde Goulard de Westberg, Barcelona, Planeta, 1982.

¹³ La Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE) was founded as an alternative to defend academic freedom and the right to teach independently of the reigning political or religious dogma. Its most prominent representative was Francisco Giner de los Ríos, who was profoundly compromised with the philosophy of Krause, which found eco in Spain, because it was found to be in line with liberal reformist ideas at the time. ILE existed from 1867 to 1939, when it was deemed as contrary to the nationalist-catholic ideals of franquismo. After the dictatorship, in 1978, ILE rose again and exists to this day. There are numerous references to the ILE. We will cite only the monumental work of A. Jiménez-Landi, *La Institución Libre de Enseñanza y su ambiente*, 2 vols., Madrid, Taurus, 1973-1987.

¹⁴ A. Svensson, «Mistral och femton böcker». *Om Gabriela Mistral, Matilde Goulard, Nils Hedberg och Iberoamerikanska institutets första år*, in A. Castro, E. Jiménez Tornatore, I. Söhrman (edd.), *Desde Chile a Suecia: caminos culturales por Latinoamérica y Europa: festschrift till Álvaro Foresti*, Göteborg, Göteborgs universitet, Institutionen för språk och litteraturer, 2018, pp. 93-108.

¹⁵ Although there were only two translations, there were numerous reissues and versions adapted for children of different ages. In some of them, little remains of the original work apart from the two main characters.

¹⁶ T. Kure-Bonne, *El maravilloso viaje de Nils Holgersson a través de Suecia de Selma Lagerlöf: similitudes y diferencias en dos versiones de su traducción al español. Causas y consecuencias en la traducción de algunos cultuaremas y topónimos* [undergraduate thesis in Spanish], Karlstad, Karlstads universitet, 2017, <<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1181911/FULLTEXT01.pdf>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

ing a foreignizing strategie, the translator does not try to conceal the fact that the text at hand is a translation.

One example of this difference between Talavera and Goulard is how they handle place names. Talavera omits several toponyms, possibly fearing that they might alienate the Spanish readers, while Goulard tends to keep the original names. In the example of this below, taken from Kure-Bonne's findings¹⁷, the toponyms are in bold:

The Swedish original

Vet nu, gåskarl, att jag är Akka från **Kebnekajse**, och att den gåsen, som flyger närmast mig till höger, är Yksi från **Vassijaure**, och den till vänster är Kaksi från **Nuolja**! Vet också, att den andra högergåsen är Kolme från **Sarjektjåkko**, och den andra vänstergåsen är Neljä från **Svappavaara**, och att bakom dem flyger Viisi från **Oviksfjällen** och Kuusi från **Sjangeli**!

1921 Spanish translation, Talavera Björnberg

Sabed que soy Okka. El pato que vuela a mi derecha es Yksi y el que vuela a mi izquierda es Kaksi. El segundo de la derecha se llama Kolme y el de la izquierda es Neljä. Tras ellos vuelan Viisi de los **Montes de Ovik** y Kunki de **Sjangeli**.

1982 Spanish translation, Goulard de Westberg

¡Sabrás que yo soy Akka de **Kebnekajse** y que el ganso que vuela junto a mí, a la derecha, es Ykside **Vassijaure** y el de mi izquierda Kaksi de **Nuolja**! ¡Has de saber también que el segundo de la derecha es Kolme de **Sajektjakkoo** y el de la izquierda es Nelja de **Svappavaara** y detrás de ellos vuelan Viisi de **Ovik** y Kuusi de **Sjangeli**!

In the examples above, seven place names appear in the original Swedish text, of which Talavera omitted all but two. Goulard, however, reinstated the others. Retaining exotic place names certainly is a foreignizing strategy and, according to Kure-Bonne, it is reasonable to believe that the greater openness to the world outside of Spain in the 1980s made it easier for such solutions to gain acceptance.

3. Reception of Nils Holgersson in Spain

The early reception of Selma Lagerlöf's works in Spain has been investigated by Jenny Bergenmar¹⁸, who focuses on the period up until 1914, using the digital resource connected to the Spanish National Library, *Hemeroteca digital*, which contains historical press materials from the early days of the press

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁸ J. Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, «European Journal of Scandinavian Studies», vol. 48, n. 2, 2018, pp. 170-188.

through the 1900s. This resource covers a wide range of publications on topics such as politics, science, religion, literature, and more.

The cultural distance between the two semiperipheral countries Spain and Sweden was significant at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Cultural expressions such as art and literature were normally mediated by the dominant cultural centre, Paris¹⁹. Around the turn of the century, there was a general conception in the rest of Europe that the Nordic countries represented modernity, progress, and women's emancipation. Ibsen's *A doll's house*, especially the character Nora, played a great part in shaping this idea of the North²⁰. It is therefore not surprising that the scarce press material mentioning Lagerlöf emphasizes the exotic aspects of the North and the fact that this prominent and successful writer was a woman. Nor is it surprising that parts of the texts published in Spanish press obviously are recycled from primarily French sources, and sometimes also German ones. Bergenmar finds that Lagerlöf had limited presence before the Nobel Prize: the Swedish writer appears briefly in three texts, dating from 1898, 1906, and 1907. According to Bergenmar²¹, Ellen Key was better known, and her *The Century of the Child* was much discussed in Spain. However, after the Nobel Prize, there was an increasing number of articles on Lagerlöf.

From the 1910s, several prominent Spanish authors and intellectuals dwell on Lagerlöf, and apart from references to some unsigned articles, Bergenmar discusses mainly those written by Ángel Guerra²² and Julián Juderías²³. She argues that both Guerra and Juderías are primarily influenced by French literary critique, yet they represent two different approaches often adopted by critics of Lagerlöf: while Guerra emphasize Lagerlöf's deep connection to her homeland and popular traditions, portraying her as «an amiable grandmother»²⁴, Juderías considers her as a modern woman who paves the way for others, adopting a more progressive tone.

Bergenmar's study focuses on Lagerlöf's presence in Spanish press until 1914, and it is broader than the present in the sense that it includes all articles on the Swedish writer, while this investigation focuses on *Nils Holgersson*. However, much of the material from the 1910s coincide, since the geography

¹⁹ P. Casanova, *The world republic of letters*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004.

²⁰ E. Lindholm Narváez, *The Valkyrie in a bikini. The Nordic woman as a progressive media icon*, in J. Harvard, P. Stadius (edd.), *Communicating the North. Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, Farnham, pp. 197-218.

²¹ Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, cit., p. 176.

²² A. Guerra, *Literatura contemporánea: Selma Lagerlof*, «La España moderna», n. 1, 1911, pp. 117-137.

²³ J. Juderías, *El triunfo de la imaginación: Selma Lagerloef*, «La lectura», n. 1, 1910, p. 43.

²⁴ Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, cit., p. 181.

book had been published in 1906-1907. The subsequent survey of the reception of *Nils Holgersson* in Spain includes a preliminary quantitative presentation followed by a qualitative analysis of the texts written about the work, from 1905–1985.

3.1. Nils Holgersson in Spain: a constant but faint presence

As for the preliminary quantitative part of this study, we expected to find an increase in the number of articles mentioning the Selma Lagerlöf, in general, and *Nils Holgersson*, in particular, in relation to three key events: the Nobel Prize award in 1909, the publication of the first translation in 1921, and the publication of the second translation in 1982.

To investigate this, we turned to the aforementioned *Hemeroteca digital*, and used *Nils Holgersson*, with the alternative spelling *Nils Holgerson*, as a search term. The search covered the period from January 1905 to December 1985 and yielded 846 results of which 716 correspond to 1985²⁵. There were no hits during the first five years of the period; the first results appeared in 1910. These hits are presented in Pic. 1.

As shown in the diagram above, the hits are few and rather evenly distributed across the years, with a few exceptions. Using as a criterion five or more hits, we will pay some extra attention to the following years: 1910, 1911, 1922, 1926, 1961, 1962, 1978, 1984, and 1985 (not in the graph).

Looking closer to these years, we discern that, in 1910, there are seven results, of which three refer to the same article, while one briefly mentions *Nils Holgersson* in passing, focusing on another subject. This leaves four articles deserving of closer attention.

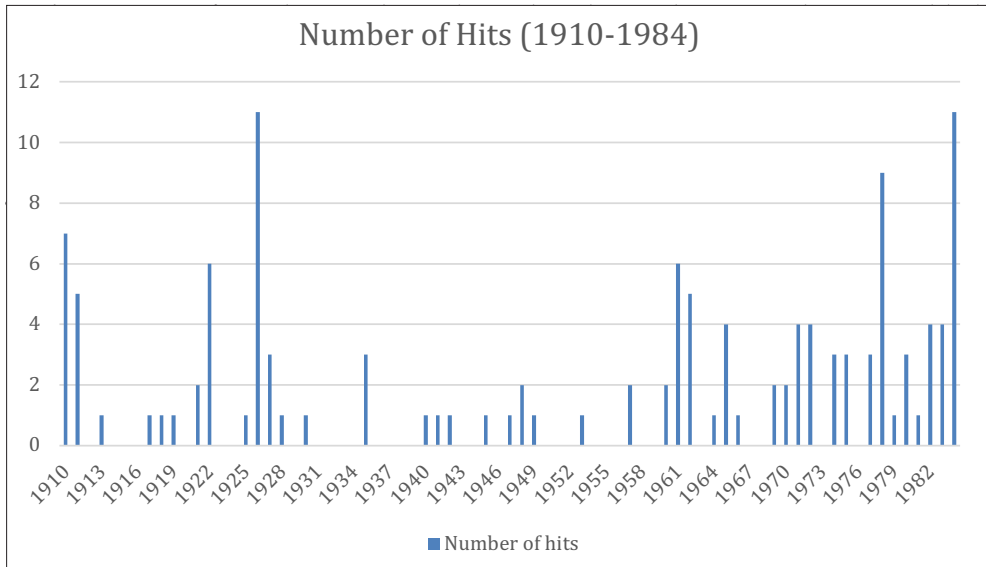
Five hits from 1911 include one brief mention and two articles warranting more careful consideration.

A closer look at the hits from 1922 shows that they consist of five advertisements for the book and one brief mention, i.e. none of the hits are of interest.

In contrast, 1926 offers more substantial contributions. Although the 11 results include eight advertisements for *Nils Holgersson*, two short reviews and one short article are found.

During the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, very little attention is paid to *Nils*

²⁵ We intended to continue the search until 2025, but *Hemeroteca Digital* does not allow the full content to be read on any computer, which made it difficult to complete the search in recent decades. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the trend is similar to that observed in the previous decades, in that there are very occasional references to Lagerlöf, and a significant number of references to television schedules when the cartoon was rebroadcast.



Pic. 1. Results from *Hemeroteca digital* for the search *Nils Holgersson/Nils Holgerson* 1905-01-01 till 1984-12-31.

The significant increase in hits from 1985 can be easily explained²⁶: it coincides with the debut on Spanish television of the animated series based on the book. Most of the hits are from the television schedules, where the name of the Swedish goose boy is mentioned daily.

In all, our survey of the *Nils Holgersson* hits in Spanish press indicates that while references to the book are present over the years, it is often in passing or within other contexts. A noticeable surge of interest for Lagerlöf and *Nils Holgersson* can be observed in 1910 and 1911, shortly after the Nobel Prize.

²⁶ From 1985 onwards, the same pattern repeats itself; that is, the appearance of Nils Holgersson is linked to its broadcast on television. There are some years in which it appears more than a hundred times (716, 479, 127, 531, 396, 137, 563, and 476 hits), but in the others it hardly appears or appears irrelevantly. Besides, despite the emergence of new television channels and the spread of online platforms, this has not meant that Nils Holgersson has reached new generations. In a survey of 63 students studying Pedagogy at the University of Malaga, they were asked if they had heard of Selma Lagerlöf and if they knew who she was, and if they had heard of Nils Holgersson. This is the link to the questionnaire: <<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1ib7-I6FUpbXZ7TqXb0wuiuvqcWHeAlN6X0S5RfFI0c/edit>> (last access: 27.02.2025). Next, they were shown an image from the cartoon series, and the results were similar. Of the 66 students, only four recognized it: «I recognise it and it looks familiar, but I don't know where from». «The image looks familiar. I've seen it in my grandmother's old books». «It looks very familiar, but I don't know where from». «Some film or cartoon». In summary, none of them knew Lagerlöf or Nils Holgersson, nor did they recognise the image.

However, the publication of the Talavera translation in 1921 does not seem to generate much attention, even if the press coverage in 1926 may be a delayed response to the earlier translation. In 1984, the increase in attention to the book might be linked to the 1982 retranslation, which we will investigate further in the analysis below.

Our preliminary hypothesis of an increase around the time of the Nobel Prize and following the translations remains plausible but requires further examination by a closer look at the texts. Overall, the press materials collected contain few substantial articles focused solely on *Nils Holgersson*. Including both short notices and more in-depth texts, the total number of texts for analysis in the following section below amounts to 14.

3.2. *Imagination celebrates triumphs in the Swedish Quixote*

When examining the press material from a qualitative perspective, the overall aim is to analyze whether *Nils Holgersson* is treated as any children's book or if the Spanish critics also highlight its instructive and didactic dimension.

3.2.1. *In the wake of the Nobel Prize*

As mentioned above, four different Spanish press texts from 1910 focus on *Nils Holgersson* as a central theme. The first, found in the Madrid weekly publication *Por esos mundos*, is also included in Bergenmar's study. In an unsigned article, titled «Foreign Literature» [*Literatura extranjera*]²⁷ considerable space is devoted to the Noble Prize winner Selma Lagerlöf. The article discusses Lagerlöf's background in Värmland and her love of the soil. This has been contextualized by Bergenmar as a tendency to understand Lagerlöf as the voice of a tradition and a people, more than as an original artist²⁸. In the description of the years leading up to her success as a writer, it can be noted that a few errors have slipped in. For instance, it is mistakenly stated that Lagerlöf started working as a teacher in Stockholm, when in fact she taught in the small southern town of Landskrona. The article covers some of her works but, according to the author, the book that most fully reveals Lagerlöf's personality is *Nils Holgersson*, which, in a very short period, sold 18,000 copies²⁹. The

²⁷ Anonymous, *Literatura extranjera*, «Por esos mundos», 1910, January 1, pp. 29-33.

²⁸ Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, cit., p. 177.

²⁹ Anonymous, *Literatura extranjera*, cit., p. 30.

anonymous author prizes the energy that characterizes Lagerlöf's writing, and focusing on *Nils Holgersson*, it says: «for everything, the distinguished novelist finds the most energetic verb, the most suitable adjective, the most passionate and fitting phrase»³⁰. Aside from this praise, nothing further is mentioned about the Swedish schoolbook.

Another article mentioning *Nils Holgersson*, that indeed has a named author, is Julián Juderías' *The triumph of imagination* in the periodical «La Lectura»³¹. Before delving into the contents of the article, it is relevant to briefly acquaint its author: Juderías was the chief editor of «La Lectura», with which he collaborated remotely from his position in Odessa. Trilingual in Spanish, English, and French from childhood, he was one of the few Spaniards of his time who knew Russian and was familiar with that cultural sphere. He is said to have been proficient in 12 more languages, including Norwegian and Swedish³². This versatility may be an explanation of Juderías' interest, and, as it seems, insights, in Swedish literature.

The first thing that stands out to the modern reader in Juderías' article, which has also been noted by Bergenmar, is his comparison of Lagerlöf to Ellen Key. Juderías states that the two female authors are both accomplished writers and prominent representatives of the feminist movement³³. Juderías expresses strong sympathy for the fight for women's rights and believes that Lagerlöf and Key demonstrate that women can reach their full intellectual and artistic potential without sacrificing their feminine charms and virtues³⁴.

As a characteristic feature of Lagerlöf's works, Juderías points to the fantastic dimension. According to him, it is not surprising that this trait is present, because he considers the Nordics superior in imagination compared to any other skill³⁵. He aligns with critics who emphasize Lagerlöf's ability to absorb legends and popular stories, allowing the Swedish people to express themselves thorough her narrative. As Bergenmar points out, Lagerlöf's imagination is emphasized as a sharp contrast to realistic-naturalistic aesthetics³⁶.

³⁰ Translated from the original: «[P]ara todo la egregia novelista encuentra el verbo más enérgico, el adjetivo más adecuado, la frase más caliente y más justa». *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³¹ J. Juderías, *El triunfo de la imaginación: Selma Lagerloef*, cit., pp. 43-52.

³² A translator, writer, historian, and sociologist, Julián Juderías is still remembered today for developing the theory of the Black Legend surrounding Spain. *La esfera de los libros* (n.d.), Julián Juderías. See Julián Juderías, «La esfera de los libros», n.d., <<https://www.esferalibros.com/autores/julian-juderias>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

³³ Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, cit.

³⁴ Juderías, *El triunfo de la imaginación: Selma Lagerloef*, cit., p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁶ «Selma Lagerloef, lo mismo que su ilustre compatriota Ellen Key, tiene además una doble personalidad, un doble mérito para cuantos estudian el movimiento literario de nuestro tiempo: ambas son, á la vez que escritoras de altos vuelos, que dejarán huella perdurable en las letras, representantes conspicuos de ese avance feminista que tiene por objeto conquistar para la mujer un lugar más importante que el que hoy ocupa y una influencia más decisiva de la que hoy ejerce

In Juderías' opinion, Lagerlöf's most important works are *Gösta Berling* and *Nils Holgersson*³⁷. He calls the latter «a new and most curious geography of Sweden»³⁸. Several times, he invokes the French authority André Bellessort, who, seemingly, has an ambivalent attitude to Lagerlöf³⁹. Bellessort was the author of a book about Sweden, *La Suède*⁴⁰, and he also got acquainted to Lagerlöf during his visit to the country. In his book, he writes, among many other things that have to do with the people's spirit, that the Swedish reader demands works of imagination to lighten up a harsh and boring existence⁴¹. However, according to Bellessort, *Nils Holgersson* was not likely to resonate with the pedagogues of the time, who were mainly focused on teaching children about the tangible realities of life, which he laments⁴². Juderías is clearly influenced by the French authority, especially in his focus on imagination.

In a concluding paragraph, Juderías offers reflections that, in fact, resonate in a modern eco-criticism context. According to this Spanish critic from the beginning of the 20th century, *Nils Holgersson* teaches that we have to cherish the infinite goodness of nature and its mysteries, and that we have to respect both the beings close to us and those we have yet to encounter, because all of us carry a spark within of the goodness that Lagerlöf attributes to Mother Nature⁴³. In Juderías' view, *Nils Holgersson*, though a book for children, is also highly recommendable for adult readers⁴⁴.

Curiously enough, in the same issue of «La Lectura», we find a less favourable assessment of Selma Lagerlöf's literature: a translation of André Bellessort's review of her work, on the occasion of her Nobel Prize award. The French critic is not impressed by Lagerlöf's compositions, which he finds fragmented, and disagrees with her handling of the characters. At the end of his re-

y si fuera preciso convencer á algunos de esos que miran con desconfianza las reivindicaciones feministas, por creer que su triunfo acarrearía grandes males y perturbaría hondamente la vida social, bastaría, creo yo, con aducir el ejemplo de estas dos escritoras para convencerles de que la mujer puede y debe ocupar el lugar á que aspira, sin perder ninguno de los atractivos, ninguno de los encantos, ninguna de las virtudes de su sexo, sino antes por el contrario, por razón de estos atractivos, de estos encantos y de estas virtudes». *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁸ «una nueva y curiosísima geografía de Suecia». *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁹ It has been claimed that André Bellessort was the first translator of Nils Holgersson into French, but, in fact, it was Thekla Hammar who undertook the translation, and Bellessort assisted her with linguistic advice.

⁴⁰ A. Bellessort (1911). *La Suède [e-book]*, Paris, 1911, p. 44, <<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/43359>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

⁴¹ Bellessort, *La Suède*, cit., p. 309, <<https://runeberg.org/lasuede/0321.html>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

⁴² Juderías, *El triunfo de la imaginación: Selma Lagerloef*, cit., p. 51.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

view, he speculates that her Nobel speech was probably not as beautiful as that of Björnsterne Björnson, because, in his opinion, Lagerlöf lacks eloquence⁴⁵.

Finally, the same year, *Nils Holgersson* appears in a text written by Fernando Araujo⁴⁶ for the influential Spanish cultural magazine *La España moderna*. Once again, it is obvious that the Spanish intelligentsia lend their ears to Bellessort, who argues that the Swedish people crave this kind of imaginative literature; the Swedish are drawn to the unexpected, intense sensations, the supernatural, adventures in the forests, and the poetry of wandering through swamps, ultimately finding their way home⁴⁷. This happens to be an almost direct translation of Bellessort, who writes about the poetry of the swamps in his text about Lagerlöf⁴⁸. Even if *Nils Holgersson* is treated in this article, Araujo devotes more space to Lagerlöf's *The legends of Christ*.

Two articles mention *Nils Holgersson* in 1911. The first, titled *Selma Lagerlöf*, appears in the contemporary literature section in «La España moderna». The text is written by Ángel Guerra, pseudonym for José Betancort Cabrera, a writer and cultural journalist originally from the Canary Islands but residing in Madrid at the time⁴⁹. Guerra was one of the most influential Spanish intellectuals of the period.

In her research on Lagerlöf, Bergenmar found an earlier article by Guerra. In that article, he «repeatedly situates Lagerlöf in a specific geographic and cultural domain»⁵⁰, specifically her home region. In the 1911 article, Guerra continues to emphasize Lagerlöf as a writer deeply connected to her soil and tradition, mentioning *Nils Holgersson* in the context of the author's often-discussed vivid imagination. Guerra wonders where Lagerlöf's fantastic storytelling originates, and notes that Swedish Nobel award winner frequently

⁴⁵ «Ella no tiene elocuencia». A. Bellessort, *La fantasía sueca*, «La Lectura», n. 1, 1910, p. 115.

⁴⁶ F. Araujo, *La labor de Selma Lagerlöf*, «La España moderna», n. 5, 1910, pp. 200-202. Araujo's impression of Bellessort can be explained by the fact that he was well-versed in French and had, among other things, published a French grammar book. See also L. González Corrales, *Fernando Araujo*, in M. Alvar Ezquerro, M.A. García Aranda, *Biblioteca Virtual de la Filología Española (BVFE): directorio bibliográfico de gramáticas, diccionarios, obras de ortografía, ortología, prosodia, métrica, diálogos e historia de la lengua*, n.d. <<https://www.bvfe.es/es/autor/9228-araujo-y-gomez-fernando.html>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

⁴⁷ «El sueco pide á sus novelistas que le den cuentos extraños, adora lo inesperado, la sensación viva, lo sobrenatural, las aventuras en las selvas, la poesía de los extravíos á través de los pantanos, á cuyo extremo se encuentra el buen camino del hogar». *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

⁴⁸ «[Le Suédois] adore l'inattendu, la sensation vive, le mystère, le surnaturel qui flotte sur la nature comme les elfes du brouillard, les aventures dans des forêts que personne n'a foulées, la poésie des égarements à travers les marécages au bout desquels on retrouve enfin le bon chemin du foyer». Bellessort, *La Suède*, cit., p. 309.

⁴⁹ A. Guerra, *Literatura contemporánea: Selma Lagerlof*, «La España moderna», n. 1, 1911, pp. 117-137.

⁵⁰ Bergenmar, *The North seen from the South in the Spanish reception of Selma Lagerlöf*, cit., p. 179.

cites her grandmother and her father as important sources of her imaginative tales. In *Nils Holgersson*, Guerra finds an episode he believes exemplifies the interplay in Lagerlöf's work between harsh reality and marvellous legends, between the monotony of daily labour and the pleasures and festivities. In this episode, this interaction ensures that life remains vibrant and never tiresome: there is the harvesting of potatoes, collecting of fruit, spinning of flax, and long-term visits of a travelling shoemaker, all often done in the company of people from nearby farms. Additionally, there are memorable festivities, such as Christmas Eve and Santa Lucia celebrations⁵¹. Referring to this passage in *Nils Holgersson*, Guerra connects Lagerlöf's art closely to her homeland, but he also wonders what Sweden is really like. He reflects upon the fact that some of Lagerlöf's stories are difficult to fully comprehend without a Scandinavian background. As for *Nils Holgersson*, Guerra argues that while it has a simple plot, it carries a philosophical and instructive dimension [«¡qué fondo filosófico más educador!»⁵²] that makes it comparable to, if not better than, Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

The same year, the second issue of «La España moderna» features Selma Lagerlöf's Nobel Prize banquet speech, titled *The legend of a debt*⁵³. In this speech, Lagerlöf recounts the story of how she travelled by train to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize. She declares that she is in debt not only with the readers, especially with the children who have written to her to thank her for *Nils Holgersson*, but also to the abundant generosity of nature.

All in all, the authors writing about *Nils Holgersson* in Spanish reviews during the first decade of the 20th century were strongly and directly influenced by André Bellessort. Like the French literary critic and connoisseur of Swedish life, they emphasize Lagerlöf's imaginative gifts, though they do not mention the book as a schoolbook. However, one of the authors, Ángel Guerra, does mention the book's educational qualities.

3.2.2. Nils Holgersson in the 1920s

As mentioned earlier, the numerous results from the search for material from the first half of the 1920s in *Hemeroteca digital* proved irrelevant, so we will turn directly to 1926. That year, the magazine «Literatura hispano-americana» features, in its «Bibliografía» section, the publication of *Nils Holgersson*

⁵¹ Guerra, *Literatura contemporánea: Selma Lagerlof*, cit., pp. 120-121.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵³ S. Lagerlöf, *La leyenda de una deuda*, «La España moderna», n. 2, 1911, pp. 166-171. See also <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1909/lagerlof/speech/>> (last access: 27.02.2025).

in the Editorial Cervantes' series «Los príncipes de la literature». The assessment of the book is highly appreciative, with the anonymous reviewer echoing Talavera's description of the book as the *Don Quixote* of the Swedish children. *Nils Holgersson* is described as highly suggestive, irresistibly enchanting, and having left a deep impression on the anonymous author of the notice⁵⁴.

Equally positive, but from a different perspective, is the 1926 article written by María Luz Morales in «El Sol»⁵⁵. Under the title *Books for children*, Morales criticizes the new trend, also noted by Bellessort, of prioritizing the practical aspects of life in school education, relegating fantasy and imagination to a secondary role. Her argument is that children should be allowed to read enjoyable literature in their free time. If not, they will come to regard reading as a tedious activity and avoid books altogether⁵⁶. It is exceedingly demanding to expect children to read additional instructional literature after a long school day:

When they are allowed to set away books imposed on them by primary and secondary education, we leave them with... other educational books. Of course, in these, the lesson to be learnt is disguised –which makes it even more cloying and repulsive– under the too often used precept of teaching by delighting. As it is commonly practised, it is like those umbrella-canes that serve neither as umbrellas nor as canes; it neither delights nor instructs⁵⁷.

Adults must respect children's reading tastes, and when it comes to modern literature, Morales argues that there is no more enjoyable and entertaining option than *Nils Holgersson*⁵⁸.

Finally, in a short notice in «La Vanguardia», the signature Argus calls *Nils Holgersson* an incomparable and suggestive book, and he repeats the epithet «the Don Quixote of the Swedish children»⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ «La obra es de una sugestión tan grande, de un encanto tan irresistible, que no recordamos que ningún otro libro nos haya impresionado tan dulce y profundamente». Anonymous, *Bibliografía*, «Literatura hispano-americana», n. 154, 1926, p. 32.

⁵⁵ M.L. Morales, *Libros para niños*, «El Sol», 1926, November 19, p. 1. Morales oversaw the family themes section in «El Sol» from 1926 to 1931, but she is best known as a pioneering film critic and the first female chief editor of a cultural magazine, «La Vanguardia», in 1936-1937.

⁵⁶ «Peso de llevar que, quien ha tenido que soportarlo exclusivamente y a la fuerza desde muy niño, lo suelta muchas veces lanzando un hondo suspiro de alivio... para no volver a tomar un libro en sus manos jamás. Y esto, por amar al niño y por amor al libro, es lo que debemos evitar». *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ «Cuando les es dado abandonar por un momento los libros que la enseñanza primera o segunda les imponen, dejamos en sus manos... otros libros de enseñanza. Claro está que en éstos la lección va disfrazada—lo que la hace más empalagosa y repugnante—en atención a la letra del tan manoseado precepto de “instruir deleitando”. Con el que, tal como suele entenderse y practicarse, sucede como con los bastones-paraguas, que no sirven como paraguas ni como bastón; ni deleita ni instruye». *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Argus, «La Vanguardia», 1926, September 3, p. 19.

In summary, among the texts on *Nils Holgersson* from the 1920's, the one that most draws our attention is the article on children's reading habits by María Luz Morales. It is somewhat curious that the schoolbook *Nils Holgersson* is highlighted as a counterpoint to the schoolbooks that Spanish children are supposed to read, and that the author specifically recommends it as a book for leisure reading.

3.2.3. *Nils Holgersson in the 1980s – before the television breakthrough*

As mentioned in the quantitative part of this study, several newspapers and periodicals included *Nils Holgersson* among their reading recommendations in 1984. A closer look showed that these recommendations were frequently accompanied by information on the new Akal edition. It would be reasonable to believe that this new edition was a promotion of the 1982 *Nils Holgersson* translation, made by Goulard. However, upon closer inspection of the Akal edition, it turns out that it consists of the Talavera translation. This is confirmed by Pilar Trenas, who mentions in Spanish newspaper *ABC* that *Nils Holgersson* had last been published in the 1960s, but since the copies had run out, Akal decided to reissue the book⁶⁰. The increase in numbers of hits thus corresponds to the reissuing of Talavera's translation.

Apart from several brief reading tips, one article stands out in the 1984 material: in «Diario 16», the famous Spanish author of *Wolf Moon* [*Luna de lobos*], Julio Llamazares, calls *Nils Holgersson* a masterpiece, and gives it three stars, which was supposedly the magazine's highest rating⁶¹. Llamazares recounts the story of the Swedish schoolbook project and asks, rhetorically, how a textbook with educational purposes could become so successful. The answer, he states, is very simple: «[T]he commission had not been given to a teacher or an expert in geography, but to one of the most imaginative writers with the most beautiful language in the history of Swedish and world literature»⁶². It is noteworthy, that when Llamazares summarizes the plot, he omits the disobedience of Nils, writing that this teenaged farmer boy in Southern Sweden got tired of life in a reduced rural ambit and felt the desire to discover new places and horizons⁶³.

⁶⁰ P. Trenas, «ABC», 1984, January 28, p. 58.

⁶¹ J. Llamazares, *El maravilloso viaje de Nils Holgersson*, «Cambio 16», 1984, May 13, p. 29.

⁶² «[E]l encargo había sido hecho no a una profesora ni a una experta en geografía, sino a una de las escritoras más imaginativas y de lenguaje más hermoso de la historia de la literatura sueca y universal». *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

4. *Reacapitulation and discussion*

This study on the reception of Selma Lagerlöf's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* demonstrates that the book has been present in Spanish press since 1910, the year that followed on Lagerlöf's Nobel Prize award. Before that, Spanish readers had only been introduced briefly to the Swedish author. The Nobel Prize brought her authorship into focus, and she was introduced and her works reviewed in the Spanish cultural magazines of the days. As Bergenmar (2018) points out, the Spanish intellectuals were impressed by cultural authorities, mainly from France, with Paris being the dominant cultural centre, but also, to some extent, by German critics. Some of the most prominent Spanish intellectuals of the time, such as Ángel Guerra, Julián Juderías, and María Luz Morales, commented on *Nils Holgersson* in the first two decades of the 20th century, but they echo a strong influence, especially from the French critic André Bellessort.

A sense of self-doubt can be discerned in some of the Spanish authors' writings: they are drawn to Lagerlöf's work and, by extension, to the exotic North, but they know little about Sweden, which leads them to rely heavily on authorities such as Bellessort. Some even explicitly state that they would probably enjoy Lagerlöf's work more fully if they had been more familiar with Sweden. As Bergenmar mentions, recycling not only of ideas but also of phrasing is frequently encountered. Some reviews of *Nils Holgersson* are exceedingly assertive, and the often-cited phrase «the *Don Quixote* of the Swedish children» awakes the suspicion that some of the authors relied more on Talavera's prologue to his translation than on their own careful reading of the book.

The fact that *Nils Holgersson* was originally commissioned as a schoolbook is mentioned in several of the *Hemeroteca* articles. However, the book's instructive aspects are generally mentioned in passing, while the authors focus first and foremost on the vivid imagination that flows from its pages. It is noteworthy that Morales (1926b) in fact uses *Nils Holgersson* as an example of literature that is *different* from schoolbooks, being an enjoyable option for the free time. Just like Bellessort, Morales highlights the reigning practical-realist trend in children's education and finds it delimiting. Almost 60 years later, Llamazares would express that *Nils Holgersson*, as a work of fantasy, by far transcends the typical dimensions of a schoolbook of its time. It is noticeable that Llamazares overlooks the moral lesson in the boy's initial transformation, a punishment for his disobedience, and emphasizes the fact that he wanted to go out and broaden his horizons.

