

# Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia



# Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia

Edited by

Ann-Sofie Lönngren, Heidi Grönstrand,  
Dag Heede and Anne Heith

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia

Edited by Ann-Sofie Lönngren, Heidi Grönstrand, Dag Heede  
and Anne Heith

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2015 by Ann-Sofie Lönngren, Heidi Grönstrand, Dag Heede,  
Anne Heith and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without  
the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7838-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7838-8

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	viii
Editors' Introduction .....	ix

## **Part I: Key Concepts and Theoretical Reflections**

National, Transnational and Entangled Literatures: Methodological Considerations Focusing on the Case of Finland.....	2
Mikko Pollari, Hanna-Leena Nissilä, Kukku Melkas, Olli Löytty, Ralf Kauranen and Heidi Grönstrand	
Challenging the Bodies and Borders of Literature in Scandinavia: Methodological Nationalism, Intersectionality and Methodological Disciplinary .....	30
Annika Olsson	
Immigrant Literature in Finland: The Uses of a Literary Category .....	52
Olli Löytty	

## **Part II: Rethinking Language, Literature and National Belonging**

Sophie Elkan's Ambiguous Dream of the Orient: On Cultural Identity and the National Literary Canon.....	78
Helena Bodin	
Reindeer Revisited: Traditional Sámi Features in Contemporary Sámi Poetry .....	104
Kaisa Ahvenjärvi	
Religion and Revolt in Colonial Scandinavia: Postcolonial Representations in Three Novels .....	130
Margareta Petersson	

**Part III: Queering the “Nordic”**

A Gay History of Nordic Literature: Reflections on a Future Project .....	158
Dag Heede	
Cross-Dressing Mysteries and Monsters: Nineteenth- and Twenty-First- Century Cross-Dressers in Swedish Suspense Fiction.....	181
Moa Sam Holmqvist	
Trolls!! Folklore, Literature and “Othering” in the Nordic Countries .....	205
Ann-Sofie Lönngren	
Index of Names.....	231

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### Cover

*The Dove. Nr. 12.* Hilma af Klint. 1915. Public domain.

### Chapter One

*Still Life.* David Teniers the Younger, c. 1645–1650. Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium. Public domain.

### Chapter Four

All images are from the book *Drömmen om Österlandet*. Sophie Elkan. 1901. Public domain.

### Chapter Six

*Berømte danske Mænd og Kvinder.* Hans Egede, J. P. Trap. 1868. Public domain.

*Thule Greenlanders Whaling.* Hans Egede. Eighteenth century. Public domain.

*FÆROARUM.* Faroe map. Lucas Debes. 1873. Public domain.

*The village of Kautokeino.* A. F. Skjöldebrand. 1799. Public domain.

*Pastor Læstadius preaching to the Sami.* Auguste François Biard. 1840. Public domain.

*Stamp of the Faroe Islands.* William Heinesen. 1988. Public domain.

### Chapter Nine

*Askeladden.* Theodor Kittelsen. 1884. Public domain.

Illustration of Walter Stenström's *The boy and the trolls or The Adventure*, in the children's anthology *Among pixies and trolls*. John Bauer. 1915. Public domain.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editorial group would like to thank Satu Gröndahl, Vuokko Hirvonen and all the other members of the DINO network for their steadfast support during the years in which this anthology was completed. We would also like to thank The Hugo Valentin Centre and the Centre for Gender Research, both at Uppsala University, for invaluable generosity and hospitality. Anna Samuelsson, thank you for introducing us to Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), the painter of the image that is on the cover of this book.

Ann-Sofie Lönngren, Uppsala  
Heidi Grönstrand, Turku  
Dag Heede, Odense  
Anne Heith, Umeå

June 23, 2015



## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

What do we associate with the term 'Nordic'? Vikings, reindeers, polar bears, Sámi, Old Norse mythology, or maybe Hans Christian Andersen, the Nobel Prize, Nokia, Abba, and Björk? The definition of 'Nordic' changes constantly, and the fundaments for this imagined community are consequently often questioned. As a consequence of global as well as local developments and reorganizations, these discussions have intensified over the past ten to twenty years. In this collection, *Rethinking National Literatures and the Literary Canon in Scandinavia*, we want to highlight the question of the Nordic in relation to the field of literary studies.

The societal and political developments of the past decades – in the Nordic countries and beyond – have resulted in a simultaneous questioning of the established ways of looking at literature, and, for example, the ways in which genres and literary periodisations have been constructed. There has been an increasing appearance of “new” literatures constructed around language, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and social class. These “alternative” literatures, often categorized as, for example, migratory, minority, and queer literatures, have an ongoing impact on that which usually counts as Nordic literature, the literary canon, the literary establishment, and the (post)modern societies in this geographic region. Most generally, we aim to discuss the role literature plays in the building of national identities in the Nordic nation-states, particularly the historical contexts to this development. Moreover, we discuss the constructions and consequences of national literary canons, currently challenged by different critical perspectives such as postcolonial, gender and queer theories as well as indigenous and ethnic literary studies. What potential does a plurality of perspectives in literary studies have to question the very concepts of literary canon, canon formations, national self-understanding and national identity?

This three-part anthology is made up of a selection of articles representing a variety of angles in this area of research. In the first part, “Key Concepts and Theoretical Reflections”, the focus is on methodological perspectives. It begins with the article “National, transnational and entangled literatures. Methodological considerations focusing on the case of Finland”, in which

Mikko Pollari, Hanna-Leena Nissilä, Kukku Melkas, Olli Löytty, Ralf Kauranen and Heidi Grönstrand take a critical view on the understanding of the nation-state and its consequences for literary studies. While the starting point of the discussion is the critique of methodological nationalism, most of the attention focuses on the concept of the transnational and its benefits and possibilities in analysing the literary field. Finally, the article suggests that in order to highlight the importance of other relevant categories or networks than those with implicit connections to the nation, the term “entanglement” could be useful for the study of literature.

This discussion is followed by “Challenging the Bodies and Borders of Literature in Scandinavia: Methodological Nationalism, Intersectionality and Methodological Disciplinarity” by Annika Olsson. Here, Olsson addresses the questions of methodological nationalism by examining literary histories and the ways in which nations and national borders are understood in the formation of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish literatures. Olsson shows how these questions are related to scientific and democratic problems: Research is fixed, not only within national borders but also within disciplinary borders. And this *methodological disciplinarity* needs to be addressed.

The first section of the anthology ends with a discussion concerning the problems of categorization. In the article “Immigrant Literature in Finland. The Uses of a Literary Category”, Olli Löytty focuses on two aspects embedded in the term “immigrant literature”, namely, the alleged newness of the literature written by authors who come from immigrant backgrounds as well as the frame of interpretation that follows when this literature is understood as new. Löytty demonstrates the limits and weaknesses of this widely used term and, in the end, states that without at least a reflexive approach, the interpretations inevitably produce predetermined results that merely repeat the presumptions embedded in the concepts of “immigrant literature”, “migrant literature” and “multicultural literature”.

The second section of the book is called “Re-Thinking Language, Literature and National Belonging”. It begins with Helena Bodin’s article, “Sophie Elkan’s Ambiguous Dream of the Orient. On Cultural Identity and the National Literary Canon”, in which an understanding of the literary canon is proposed as a kind of cultural, collective memory. Studying the formation of a Nordic literary canon from a cultural semiotic perspective as presented by Yuri M. Lotman and others, she focuses on the

ways in which Swedish identity, Western identity and self-understanding are enacted and problematized in several works by the Swedish writer Sophie Elkan (1853–1921). In accordance with cultural semiotics, Bodin states that challenging stories like these, stories which stage cultural clashes, cultural misunderstandings and cultural differences are essential to all national literatures, their canons and the cultural identities they foster. Thus, these stories need to be narrated, discussed and interpreted.

In the second article in this section, “Reindeer Revisited: Traditional Sámi Features in Contemporary Sámi Poetry”, Kaisa Ahvenjärvi discusses the theme of Sámi identity formation from the vantage point of lyrical texts by Sámi women poets Rawdna Carita Eira and Hege Siri. She explores how the poets use and renew the traditional ethnic symbolism of the figure of the reindeer, Sámi language, and *yoik* (a traditional form of chanting), all of which today function as identity markers in Sámi cultural mobilization. The employment and renewal of these aspects mean that their texts, Ahvenjärvi suggests, come across as parts of an intertextual dialogue with other contemporary Sámi poets.

The section ends with Margareta Petersson’s contribution to this anthology, “Religion and Revolt in Colonial Scandinavia: Post-Colonial Representations in Three Novels”. Here, Petersson presents an analysis of Faroese writer William Heinesen’s novel *The Good Hope*, Danish Kim Leine’s *The Prophets of Eternal Fjord* set in Greenland, and Norwegian Hanne Ørstavik’s *The Pastor* set in northern Norway, in the region that traditionally has been the homeland of the Sámi people. Petersson wishes to contribute to the current debate on Scandinavian exceptionalism by drawing attention to literary representations that undermine ideas of colonialism as a civilizing mission and, at the same time, explore the suppressed voices of the colonized native inhabitants. The analysis is inspired by perspectives from postcolonial studies, particularly from the branch that during recent years has highlighted how the Nordic countries were part of colonizing endeavours and practices.

In the last part of the book, we let three literary scholars make attempts at “Queering the Nordic”, starting with Dag Heede’s essay, “A Gay History of Nordic Literature: Reflections on a Future Project”. This essay gives a necessarily incomplete overview of the present state of Nordic gay and queer literary scholarship and outlines an ambitious pioneering project concerning a new Nordic queer literary history. This contains both an overview of existing gay literature but also important attempts at queering the national canons of all the Nordic countries and regions. Moreover, the

article argues that the term “gay” is neither anachronistic nor outdated but still useful in the documentation of hidden and/or forgotten texts written by gay writers or in dealing with homosexual or queer themes. Thus, this future history contains both immersions in literary archives and also theoretically sophisticated attempts at further queering canonized texts in the Nordic region.

Moa Sam Holmqvist's pioneering essay, “Cross-Dressing, Mysteries and Monsters. Nineteenth- and Twenty-First-Century Cross-Dressers in Swedish Suspense Fiction”, can be read as an early chapter in the above-mentioned endeavour, highlighting a seldom-discussed theme in Swedish literature. Spanning three centuries, Holmqvist analyses how the theme of cross-dressing has undergone fundamental and important changes in literary plots in popular culture. Historically, cross-dressing was often vital in creating twists or suspense in mysteries, but as a result of the new connections between cross-dressing, homosexuality, perversion and mental illness made by sexology at the turn of the twentieth century, cross-dressing motifs in Swedish suspense fiction took on new meanings. Today, in contemporary Swedish literature, these motifs no longer seem to be employed to create mystery, but, rather, to identify the cross-dresser as either pathetic or deceptive – or both.

Finally, Ann-Sofie Lönngren contributes with the article “Trolls!! Folklore, Literature and ‘Othering’ in the Nordic Countries”. Comparing the nature and function of the troll figure in three contemporary fictional texts written in Denmark, Sweden and Finland, she argues that the re-employment of old folkloristic beliefs regarding trolls can be understood in light of a postcolonial world order, the development of the Nordic welfare states in the twentieth century, and modern Western standards relating to gender and sexuality. Ultimately, this figure challenges the Enlightenment concept of the human as a stable entity that is once and for all established by pointing instead to posthumanist processes of qualification. Finally, Lönngren predicts a “troll turn” in Nordic literature, in which this figure is further used to enlighten, establish, undermine and subvert age-old notions of a “true” Nordic people.

The editors of this volume, who are all literary scholars from Sweden, Finland and Denmark, hope that these explorations will help stimulate reflections on the concepts of power, nationality, language and literature within and outside the Nordic region. Moreover, we hope to challenge borders concerning genres, canons, concepts and definitions and invite changes in the ways we perceive identity and belonging in a globalized

world, with new ways of interpreting the “human” as well as the relationship between wo/man.

Ann-Sofie Lönngren (Uppsala University, Sweden)

Heidi Grönstrand (University of Turku, Finland)

Dag Heede (University of Southern Denmark, Denmark)

Anne Heith (Umeå University, Sweden)



**PART I:**

**KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL  
REFLECTIONS**

# NATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL AND ENTANGLED LITERATURES: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOCUSING ON THE CASE OF FINLAND

MIKKO POLLARI, HANNA-LEENA NISSILÄ,  
KUKKU MELKAS, OLLI LÖYTTY,  
RALF KAURANEN AND HEIDI GRÖNSTRAND

**Abstract:** This article scrutinises the benefits of and possibilities raised by three broadly defined conceptual lenses through which literature's embeddedness in a world marked by transnational relations and connections can be analysed: the national, the transnational and finally, the entangled. To illustrate the different perspectives, a number of empirical examples, stemming mostly from the Finnish, or, to be more precise, the transnational-Finnish, literary field are presented. The article shows that whereas the application of the transnational and even the national lens has clear benefits for answering questions of literary research, both perspectives centre, albeit in very different ways, on the category of the nation. In this context the concept of entanglement liberates analysis from the national category on the level of explicit discourse whilst not excluding it from scrutiny. Entanglement as a concept proposes that the national category and transnational networks can be studied in relation to other categories and networks forming the literary field and its various components, from texts to authors and institutions. The "entanglement approach" to literature not only deconstructs the relationship between literature – or any cultural texts, for that matter – and the national order of the world but also reaches beyond the binarism of nationalism and transnationalism.

**Keywords:** methodological nationalism, transnationalism, entanglements, literary studies, Finland



*Transnational Literature*<sup>1</sup>, *The Location of Transnational Literature*<sup>2</sup>, *Contemporary Transnational Literature*<sup>3</sup>, *Transnational Women's Literature in Europe*<sup>4</sup>, *TRANS (The Centre for Transnational Literary and Cultural Studies)*<sup>5</sup>, *Beyond Boundaries: Transnational and Transcultural Literature and Practice*<sup>6</sup>, *Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature*<sup>7</sup>,...and so forth.

**This brief** selection of titles, comprised of an e-journal, two conferences, a course, a research centre, a dissertation, and a book series, listed above stands as a testament to the overwhelming interest in things *transnational* within the study of literature at the moment. This shift in focus, dubbed “the transnational turn in literary studies” by Paul Jay (2010), signifies a change in which methodological nationalism – the nation and the nation-state as a way of delimiting the analysis of literature – has become widely challenged. The rise of postcolonial studies, border studies, diaspora studies, cosmopolitanism and globalization alongside feminism and the discourse of multiculturalism have provided new perspectives and played a role in shifting literary studies beyond the national frame. All of these have resulted in renewed ways of connecting and positing literature in the world. And truly, the interconnectedness, fluidity and mobility of phenomena over national borders have in recent years together been accepted as something of a new paradigm in the study of literature, as well as within the humanities and social sciences in general.

Analyzing literature from a genuinely post-national perspective may require new or at least reformulated concepts (Seyhan 2001), and indeed, the critique and abandonment of methodological nationalism has led to attempts at new formulations. Instead of defining their object of study as fitting into neat, fixed categories such as “national literatures”, scholars

---

<sup>1</sup> E-journal, <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/>.

<sup>2</sup> Conference in Toronto, Canada, April 2013, <http://www.acla.org/acla2013/the-location-of-transnational-literature/>.

<sup>3</sup> Course at Columbia University, New York, the United States, <http://english.columbia.edu/contemporary-transnational-literature>.

<sup>4</sup> Conference in Budapest, Hungary in May 2013 (<http://femtranslit.eu/>).

<sup>5</sup> A collaborative interdisciplinary research centre, University of Surrey, UK, <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/englishandlanguages/research/TRANS%20Research%20Centre/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dissertation by Maria-Theresia Holub, State University of New York at Binghamton, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Book series, Routledge: <http://www.routledge.com/books/series/SE0701/>.

now describe it by adding prefixes such as “cross-border”, “entangled”, “shared”, and “transnational”. Of these, “transnational” has attained the status of a keyword, bringing together like-minded scholars from different fields. Judging from the popularity of the concept, literary and cultural scholars alike (as well as many others) seem to have a need to replace methodological nationalism with something that might be called *methodological transnationalism*.

The phrase “transnational turn” implies a paradigmatic shift in the theorizing of literature. A “shift” and a “turn” furthermore suggest the existence of an evolution in scientific reasoning, an idea that research over time becomes more up-to-date and more enlightened. Consequently, previous research comes to seem lacking, inadequate or even faulty in its focus, problematisations or conclusions. This is more or less a consequence of the rhetoric of how new ideas and perspectives are proposed in scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, a perspective sensitive to transnational connections must not underestimate the significance of the national framework or the nation state when describing the dynamics of literature as a cultural and societal phenomenon (e.g. Amelina et al. 2012, 3–4).

In the following, we will continue the discussion on transnationalism, nationalism and literature. We posit ourselves amidst the transnational turn, but want to further develop the theoretical-methodological framework for understanding literature in this context. We will scrutinize the benefits and possibilities of three broadly defined conceptual lenses through which literature’s embeddedness in a world marked by transnational relations and connections can be analyzed: the national, the transnational and finally, the entangled. In terms of developmental thinking, this would suggest the kind of evolution described above, where nationalism as a framework for research would present itself as obsolete, transnationalism as a halfway position, and a perspective highlighting various entanglements as the end of a trajectory of development. However, we will try to avoid this description, which owes much to the literary conventions of the Bildungsroman or coming-of-age story, by focusing expressly on the productive aspects of each “phase” or line of thinking and showing the ways they are intertwined. Still, on a more conventional note our mapping of these perspectives will begin with a focus on the critique of methodological nationalism.

To illustrate the different perspectives, we present a number of various empirical examples stemming mostly from the Finnish, or, to be more precise, the transnational-Finnish literary field. In the next section, we will give a brief introduction to the critique of methodological nationalism, demonstrating how a methodologically nationalistic approach is indeed an inadequate way of examining literature, and then, in something of an about-face, argue that even after a transnational turn, the national category may still be relevant and useful in the study of literature. From there, we move on to the concept of the transnational, appraising the way it has thus far been utilized in the study of literature and pondering its potential and limitations. In the fourth section, we deal with the concept of entanglements, its relationship with the transnational and its possible benefits for literary studies.

### **Critique of Methodological Nationalism**

Methodological nationalism, which assumes the national category as a self-evident frame and context for research and the nation as the primary unit of study, has been a strong tendency in different disciplines of the social sciences, humanities and cultural studies (see e.g. Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; Amelina et al. 2012). As an approach, it has included an inclination to see nations as bounded, homogeneous, and static entities, an inclination which its critics have illustrated by means of a container metaphor (Beck 2000, 23–6; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). Nation-states have, in this perspective, come to be seen as naturalized entities, affixed within territorialized limits (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002, 305; Amelina & Faist 2012). According to its critics, methodologically nationalist research has shown a proclivity to examine nations as self-sufficient, autonomous systems changing only from within (Chernilo 2006b, 8; 2006a, 130; 2010, 89 & 2011, 101). It has meant a delimitation of the study of social phenomena, as society has been equated with the nation state. Another of its limitations has been its inability to pay attention to nationalism and nation-building as central to the development of modern society (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; Amelina & Faist 2012). All in all, the use of the nation as a natural starting point has directed research in such a way as to disregard other possibly significant framings and categorizations.

Sociologist Daniel Chernilo has outlined an account of the development of the critique of methodological nationalism in sociology, dividing it into three separate waves (Chernilo 2010, 88–91; see also Chernilo 2006a,

130–1 & 2006b, 6–13). According to Chernilo, the theorists of the first wave did not question the nation-state's status as the main organizing principle of the modern world but criticised the lack of attention given to it as a theoretical concept. The second wave differed decisively from the first wave, in that it was based on an assumption of profound change in historical circumstances, its key claim being that the world was going through an epochal change, globalization, which was undermining the position and importance of the nation as a frame of thinking. The current third wave consists of a rethinking of the first two waves: It rejects the concept of the nation state as a self-evident representation of society and includes a more careful stance on the hypothesis of the decline of the nation-state and also on the actual presence of a methodologically nationalistic approach in previous research. The second and third waves, in Chernilo's description, constitute what has been coined as the transnational turn in various fields of research (Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen 2004; Jay 2010; Pease 2011).

National literary histories provide illustrative examples of the consequences of methodologically nationalist approaches. By focusing on the national representativeness of authors and works of literature, they tend to emphasise the uniqueness of the literary traditions of the nation in question and ignore and obliterate the differences within it. Because literary histories have served as building materials for the master-narrative of the nation, they have turned a blind eye to, for example, the questions of shared histories, colonialist tendencies, border cultures and in-between phenomena. In their readiness to divide the literature of the world into national sectors, literary histories often fail to recognize and identify the authors that function in two or more countries or write in two or more languages.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the notion of a world divided into isolated, self-contained national entities and literatures is inconsistent with all the detectable cross-border phenomena affecting the world and the literary field. Seeing the world as consisting of "national containers" is intuitively incompatible with phenomena such as transnational migration and travel, as well as the international communication evident in ever-increasing quantities all around us. Cross-border mobility, which is spilling and mixing the

---

<sup>8</sup> This was the case with Zenta Maurina, a German-speaking Latvian writer who lived in Sweden. See Ronne 2011. About this discussion, see also Eysteinnsson 2009 and Olsson 2010.

contents of the containers, or even breaking their rims, is ubiquitous. An illustrative example of the manifold seepage occurring between national containers is offered by the most important literary prize in the Finnish context, the Finlandia Literary Prize. It is not only framed nationalistically by name; it constitutes a nationally renowned institution, which plays a major role in both the marketing and the canonization of Finnish novels. The prize is given out yearly by the Finnish Book Foundation, the aim of which (according to its rules) is to promote and support domestic literary art. However, the Finnish nomination of the Slovak-born author Alexandra Salmela's novel *27 eli kuolema tekee taiteilijan* [*27 or Death Makes an Artist*] in 2010 called into question the national framing of the prize. After the nomination, it was noted that Salmela did not have Finnish citizenship, which presented a problem, as according to the rules of the prize, it could only be given to a novel written by a Finnish citizen. However, the institution showed notable flexibility, as the rules were changed immediately so that Finnish citizenship was no longer required. Now, the prize may be awarded to "a meritorious Finnish novel" ("Finnish" here understood in a national, not linguistic sense). Thus Finnishness came to be understood as something that is not inextricably connected to the passport of the author – something of a transnational phenomenon.

The claimed "Finnishness" of the Finlandia Literary Prize is ambiguous in another sense, too. The Finnish Book Foundation responsible for giving out the prize was established in 1983 by two institutions, the Finnish Ministry of Education and the Finnish Book Publishers Association. However, when one takes a look at the long list of member publishers of the latter, next to traditional local publishing houses such as The Finnish Literary Society, Gummerus and WSOY, one finds such names as Egmont Kustannus (a publishing house owned jointly by Egmont, an international media group based in Copenhagen, and Sanoma, an international media group based in Helsinki) and BTJ Finland (a part of the Swedish-based BTJ group). And even the aforementioned WSOY, with a tradition of publishing within the Finnish borders reaching back to 1878, is presently a part of the international Swedish media company Bonnier. Thus, the supposedly national nature of the prize is given a transnational twist. An institution that at a superficial glance seems essentially Finnish at a closer look serves to dismantle an essentialist concept of Finnish literature. This is telling of the fact that even the seemingly most Finnish of institutions does not fit within national borders.

The example above is indicative of the fact that the contemporary realities of cultures, literatures and people do not follow national borders. During the last few decades, the container metaphor implied by methodological nationalism and thinking through the category of the nation has been increasingly questioned. The nation as a framework is inadequate for understanding current developments in the literary field and in society in general. There is, and indeed has been, a continuous flow of ideas and materials between the assumed containers, creating various more or less permanent connections and interactions. The insufficiency of the national lens has also become apparent with regard to the historical development of literatures. As Robert Dixon argues in an Australian context, the field of literary studies is ready to “explore and elaborate the many ways in which the national literature has always been connected to the world” (Dixon 2007, 20). In other words, methodological nationalism is an insufficient approach regarding not only contemporary literary phenomena, but the history of literature, as well.

### **The Potential Value of a Nationalist Reading Strategy**

Even though the nationalist approach involves evident risks and shortcomings, it is difficult to write about, discuss or even understand literary culture without nation as one of the most significant of the social, cultural and political categories that structures our conceptions of ourselves and others. The category of nation has implied and continues to imply the existence of borders and barriers, and through these we have framed the world in order to conceive, understand and discuss it. As a category, nation can hardly be stripped from the research agenda, even when research is deliberately trying to reach out beyond the confines of a given nation and analyze the cultural flows and connections that exist independent of national borders. The analysis of the transnational connections of literature in Finland, for instance, requires balancing texts and literary phenomena with the national order of the world. However, this does not merely mean that nation is taken into consideration in the design of the research, but rather that it is seen as instrumental in the structure of the research question; a discussion on border-crossings presupposes borders, and an analysis of transnationalism necessarily reproduces the idea of nation.

In Finland, literature and nation-building have been inseparably intertwined. The value of literature, both the genres of epic poem and novel, as a symbol of modern society was recognised in the mid-nineteenth century.

Literature formed a significant part of national culture and the difference between “us” and “them”, establishing Finnish literature as distinct from other national literatures, was of great importance (e.g. Varpio 1986, 21–30). Ever since, the category of nation has offered a strong frame for interpretation in the discipline of literary studies. It has been customary to see literature as bounded by national borders, which have been seen as converging with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic borders. This frame has produced information about entities generally known as national literatures. National history has even been a “default narrative” (Jay 2010, 5) in the study of literature. In spite of the fact that Finland is a bilingual country, with Finnish and Swedish as the official languages, the division of the literary and cultural field into separate literary institutions and traditions defined by language has taken place since the end of the nineteenth century, when Finnish became the language of administration and education along with Swedish.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of national literatures lives on in the academic division of national literature departments (Meltzer 2009). In the Finnish university system, the study of literature is divided into disciplines of Finnish literature and Comparative (or literally “General”<sup>10</sup>) literature.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, pressures have increased to merge the two disciplines, mostly backed by arguments referring to the economics of higher education and the intensification of curricular activity and knowledge production. There are obvious problems in maintaining such a nationalistically motivated division, but the debates on easing that division have also highlighted the possible value of a nationalist strategy: a nationalist division can be motivated by the needs or even demands (of a specific community) for knowledge concerning locally, geographically, historically, or socially delimited forms of culture (Meltzer 2009, 56).

Therefore, despite the obvious benefits and wide range of possibilities offered by the extensive, “general” or comparative points of departure, as implied, for example, in the ideals of “world literature” (see e.g. Damrosch

---

<sup>9</sup> For a brief overview of Finland’s linguistic situation in the past and present, see Salo 2012, 26–8.

<sup>10</sup> Deriving from the German *Allgemeine Literaturwissenschaft*.

<sup>11</sup> This division of national or domestic and general literature in Finnish higher education is complicated by the fact that at the University of Helsinki literature written in Swedish, even if written and published within the Finnish context, is taught under the heading Scandinavian Literature (in Swedish, “Nordisk litteratur”, or Nordic Literature).

2003 & 2014; Rosendahl Thomsen 2008), the basis for disciplines such as “Finnish literature” can be justified simply by referring to a division of labour in academia: If literary scholars want to do justice to the diversity of the literary cultures in the world, it is worthwhile to pay attention to prevailing cultural and linguistic differences between, say, nationally defined entities. For this, scholars certainly need categories that imply the existence of national literatures. In order to maintain sensitivity to the heterogeneity of multicultural and multilingual world literature and to the particularity of regional cultures – of which national cultures are perhaps the most dominant – the use of such categories is well-grounded.



*Still Life.* David Teniers the Younger, c. 1645–1650. Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Belgium.

Furthermore, a comparative perspective based on “national authors” or “national literatures” may prove fruitful, depending, of course, on the research in question. A comparison of objects of analysis, e.g. “Finnish” and “Swedish” literature, can reveal differences and similarities between the given entities: In order to perceive the special characteristics of the chosen objects, it is necessary to compare them with each other. As a comparison of two entities may also highlight their commonalities, the comparative method can help uncover the shared history of the objects of comparison. Basically, however, comparison is not necessarily sensitive to cultural features common to other similar objects outside the comparison



(such as stylistic models originating from shared classic texts), thus failing to acknowledge the original hybrid nature of literary traditions and the transfer of influences between the compared objects (Sapiro 2011, 231–2).

The argument to be made for the study of national literatures as a disciplinary endeavour and the benefits of comparisons of national entities point to the value of national as an epistemological and methodological framework for research. Furthermore, nationalism as an empirical phenomenon of the literary field provides yet another incentive for literary scholars to pay attention to nationalism and the nation state. For example, nationally delimited state actors continually make their presence felt in the literary field. The activities may be both regulative and promotional. In many countries, strikingly so in a Nordic context but also elsewhere, cultural and arts policies bound by national borders promote national literary cultures through various measures, for example, by directing support to local authors, publishers, literary associations and library requisitions. In the Finnish context, the National Council for Literature, a part of the Arts Promotion Centre Finland – the names of the bodies convincingly illustrate the endurance of the national category – is the central organ for arts policy in the literary field. One of its central policy measures for supporting individual authors builds on a tradition of viewing authors as representatives of the nation (“national authors”).

Another apt example of the presence and importance of the national category is, yet again, the aforementioned Finlandia Literary Prize, which shows how the interests of a local cultural field and international commercial actors can coincide within the framework of the national. The institution that awards the prize, the Finnish Book Foundation, is a joint venture of two organizations, one governmental (the Finnish Ministry of Education) and the other commercial (the Finnish Book Publishers Association). As a result, the Finlandia Literary Prize holds both a cultural-political and commercial value, both of which are connected to the perceived positive connotations of the national category. On one hand, the Finlandia Prize serves the interests of national cultural politics by promoting and strengthening a cultural entity named “Finnish literature”. On the other, it markedly boosts the sales of certain novels – the candidates and especially the winner – every year.

As the nominees for the Finlandia Literary Prize are announced at the beginning of November and the winner in December, references to the Finnish nation and Finnishness are useful not only in promoting valued

literature for readers but also in increasing Christmas sales. Thus, the significance of the “nation/national” for the literary field and in the minds of the reading public can be grasped by asking this: Would the favourable business impact of the prize be the same without the connection to the nation or under a different name and without the connotation of “our” literature that it implies? This question highlights the importance of and need for the “nation” and the “national” as analytical concepts in the study of literature.

From the perspective of the so-called “national minorities”, the national is a significant yet often complex and ambivalent category. When a group in a minority position tries to receive recognition and gain its own “voice” in the established literary field, the national category is inevitably intertwined with questions of identity and identity politics. An example of the use of the national category are the efforts to define a Sámi literature in which nationalism can serve as an empowerment strategy in the struggle for the rights of an oppressed and colonised group of people.<sup>12</sup>

For example, the author Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001) participated in the construction of Sámi history and cultural identity, and at the same time created new ways of expression that gained him a global audience. He was born in Finland, and his debut work, the pamphlet *Terveisiä Lapista* [1971; *Greetings from Lapland*] was in Finnish, but he is best known for his Sámi language poems. He was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1991 for his collection of poems *Beaivi, áhčážan* [1988; *The Sun, My Father*]. His earlier work, *Ruoktu váimmus* [1985; *Trekways of the Wind*], had already been proposed as the Sámi candidate for the prize, and the nomination helped to increase interest in Sámi literature in the Nordic countries. This interest only grew when Valkeapää finally won the prestigious prize in 1991.<sup>13</sup> His status as a representative of Finnish literature is furthermore complicated by the fact that since 1996 he lived in Skibotn, Norway. Valkeapää’s career and oeuvre demonstrate the different layers in the transnational texture of literature: local (Sámi), national (Finnish, Norwegian), regional (Nordic) and global – as well as their interconnectedness. On the other hand, his success provides an example of another kind of tendency that an author representing both local and global cultures may face. While Valkeapää has been praised as a representative

---

<sup>12</sup> About this discussion see Hirvonen 1999/2008.

<sup>13</sup> See Harald Gaski:

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/siida/reindeer/valk.htm>

for Sámi culture, the celebratory pursuits include the risk of making an indigenous artist appear as a token in a national context, serving the purpose of showing that there is no discrimination and that national or regional literatures are inclusive.

The examples above illustrate the importance and various uses of the category of the nation in the literary field. Despite the transnational turn within the study of literature, the national still occupies a central role in the way literature is produced and consumed, as well as conceptualized and presented. Therefore, it cannot be left out of the research agenda of literary studies. This does not, however, mean advocating a hasty u-turn back toward methodological nationalism; instead, we should focus critical attention on how the national category is applied and understood in the literary field. But the relevance of nationalism and the nation state to the literary field is not the only reason for literary scholars to pay attention to the category of the nation. A case can also be made for the use of the nation as an epistemological and methodological tool and framework, a form of “enlightened methodological nationalism” (Pries and Seeliger 2012, 234). Framing research in disciplinary terms as focused on nationally delimited literatures is at least in a strategic sense defensible, despite the fact that literary cultures in many ways, or even predominantly, are formed transnationally. Also, comparative research may gain from taking the national category as a starting point. Thus, the *conscious use of* methodological nationalism appears as a possibly useful, rather than a straightforwardly dismissible, distorted reading strategy. In fact, this strategy may be used as one undercurrent in literary studies aiming at an understanding of the transnational connections within the literary world.

## **Towards Transnational Literary Studies**

Although the transnational turn and, before that, the globalization debates have come to accentuate the relations between entities defined as national, cross-border cultural diffusion and global flows did not go unnoticed in earlier scholarly debates. For example, within literary studies, in the tradition following the ideas of J. W. Goethe, all literatures of the world have been considered as part of *Weltliteratur*, a concept describing the international circulation and reception of literary works, predominantly in Europe but also including texts of non-Western origin (e.g. Damrosch 2014, Rosendahl Thomsen 2008, 2–20; Damrosch 2003).

In the social sciences, previous analysis framed cultural exchange through the concepts of cultural imperialism, homogenization and hegemony (Tomlinson 1999, 79). The spread of cultural products was seen as largely unidirectional, based on and reproducing international power relations shaping the world in, for example, geopolitical centres and peripheries, or first, second and third worlds. In national contexts, “foreign” elements were seen as a threat to local cultures and literatures. What later on would be dubbed as transnationalism was rather understood in the framework of international relations, where the national category was still the norm, although the cultural exchange under critique was not necessarily driven by nation states or state actors but by various kinds of actors, such as media and publishing houses.

Transnationalism as a concept has come to highlight cross-border social and cultural relations that are upheld by other kinds of actors than those based on the nation state. Steven Vertovec’s well-established definition of transnationalism states the following:

When referring to sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders – businesses, non-government organizations, and individuals sharing the same interests (by way of criteria such as religious beliefs, common cultural and geographic origins) – we can differentiate these as ‘transnational’ practices and groups (referring to their links functioning across nation-states). The collective attributes of such connections, their processes of formation and maintenance, and their wider implications are referred to broadly as ‘transnationalism’. (Vertovec 2009, 3; see also Hannerz 1996, 6)

This definition serves to separate transnational relations from international relations, drawing a line between different kinds of actors and their respective forms of action. This separation is in many ways useful and informative of the dynamics of the literary field, but it needs to be complemented by the assertion that the study of the transnational by no means rules out attention being paid to the meanings of nationalism and the role of the nation state. As Ulrich Beck proposes in his definition of a cosmopolitan perspective for research, the national and the transnational are not in opposition to each other. Instead, the national needs to be understood as something continually formed by transnational processes. (Beck 2004, 147; 2006, 6–7.)

Whereas Vertovec’s definition above accentuates the role of different actors, Arjun Appadurai’s analysis of a globalized world through various

“scapes” and “flows” has offered a much-referred-to point of view that highlights diverse aspects of the transnationalism of the literary field. His analysis delineates five dimensions in the global flows that form people’s “imagined worlds”: ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes, mediascapescapes and ideoscapescapes. Rehearsing these reminds us of the various means through which transnational connections, and, indeed, as Appadurai highlights, “disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy”, have been generated. Appadurai’s description points to a broad spectrum of both material and ideational flows, and makes literary studies’ predominant focus on the transnational as a literary theme appear limited (Appadurai 1996, 27–47).

The questions of migration (transnational and internal), cultural exchange, social mobility and rootlessness are certainly not novelties in literature, but one can safely claim that transnational issues – the name of the phenomenon may vary – have become a dominant cultural theme in contemporary literature (Ponzanesi & Merolla 2005; Frank 2010). And as transnational issues have come to the fore, literary scholars have paid substantial attention to novels that discuss global changes and their local consequences in one way or another. The oeuvre of the Finnish novelist-playwright Sofi Oksanen presents an example of literature that is thematically tied to a transnational world and migrant experiences, an aspect of her work that has been variably noted in its reception (Tuomarla 2013). Oksanen’s treatment of Estonian history and, more broadly, the blind spots of Western historiography, have been praised by readers as well as critics. The theme is present even in Oksanen’s debut novel *Stalinin lehmät* [2003; *Stalin’s Cows*], which can be read as a migration story or migration literature (e.g. Grönstrand 2010).

Neil Lazarus’s critical comment on postcolonial criticism also applies to research on transnational literature: “To read across postcolonial literary studies is to find, to an extraordinary degree, the same questions asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions used, the same concepts mobilized, the same conclusions drawn – about the work of a remarkably small number of writers [...]” Lazarus actually states, “for the purpose of illustration”, that there is only one author in the postcolonial literary canon, Salman Rushdie, whose novels are “endlessly and fatuously cited in the critical literature as testifying to the imagined-ness – that is to say, ideality – of nationhood, the ungeneralisable subjectivism of memory and experience, the instability of social identity, the volatility of truth, the narrational constructedness of history, and so on” (Lazarus 2005, 424).

The eagerness of literary scholars to focus on either very few authors or on the thematic dimensions of literary works disregards a majority of the various cross-border flows in a transnational, global society. Consequently, the whole question of transnationalism and literature is excluded to its own hermetic sphere.<sup>14</sup>

Although the attention to thematic trends in literature highlights social changes, it does not destabilize the understanding of literatures as national. What it does do is essentially to show that the thematic scope of national literature has broadened to cover new topics reflecting and constructing contemporary (transnational) society. Literary studies obviously need to account for such shifts on the level of literary works, but the transnational perspective on literature delineates many other ways in which a local literature is not only national but is constructed in relation to other literatures.

In addition to focusing on depictions and thematisations of a world formed by globalization and transnational connections, a methodologically transnationalist study might concentrate on the ways that texts themselves move across both geographic and linguistic borders. Texts travel both as physical forms, including tangible objects, such as books as well as digital texts, and as textual phenomena, such as influences, adaptations, intertextualities and translations. As part of the transnational mediascapes, translations, for example, display how books, ideas, and ideologies move from one place to another and suggest new kinds of reception and interpretations. Traditionally, literary scholars have had difficulties accommodating translations in literary histories and their areas of study (see e.g. Kovala et al. 2007 and Eysteinnsson 2009). Translations have not always been valued for their aesthetic qualities, and there is a long tradition of seeing translations as inauthentic and misleading copies of the original. Another reason for the absence of translations in literary histories is the nation-orientedness of the genre, its function seen as presenting the characteristic features of “national” literature and literary culture, which is

---

<sup>14</sup> Søren Frank’s definition of “migration literature”, drawing on Georg Lukács’s literary theory, broadens the scope from a thematic viewpoint to an understanding of literature’s material characteristics as equally important aspects of literature of the age of increased migration, globalization and transnational contacts. As Frank (2010, 48) proposes, “*through its form*, the migrant novel sets out to *express* the content of our experiences of interculturalism and globalization [...] and, at the same time, *resolve* the problems posed by these same experiences [...]”.