# Imaginations of the North and the South in Esaisas Tegnér's poetry

**Rikard Schönström**
Lund University

## Abstract

The contrast between the North and the South was a recurrent topos in Romantic literature, and in Scandinavia it played a crucial role in the Romantic writers' search for a national cultural identity. This article deals with the meaning and function of this imagery in some of Esaias Tegnér's most famous poems. Being present already in his patriotic and partly Classicist poem 'Svea' (1811), Tegnér developed and tried to reconcile the opposition between the North and the South in his more Romantic poems, such as 'Skidbladner' (1812) and 'Flyttfåglarna' (1812), and finally created a powerful synthesis of them in his major literary work, the epic Viking tale Frithiofs saga (1825). One should note, however, that the words 'north' and 'south' in Tegnér's writings seldom refer to any specific geographic location. They seem rather to be the names of two extreme poles in his poetics. Working always together they form what the structuralists used to call a 'binary opposition'. As such they are closely related to a whole range of other binaries: Nature versus Culture, Masculine versus Feminine, the Spiritual versus the Material, Life versus Death, etc. Consequently, Tegnér makes use of them in order to develop, elaborate and structure other kinds of ideas and images. They are, in other words, not a result of his poetic imagination but a precondition for it. This tendency to think and write in opposites might be explained by the fact that Tegnér lived and worked in a period of turbulent transition in Europe, but it may also have something to do with the swinging moods and tendency to 'bipolar disorder' in his own personality.

## Keywords
Romanticism, Scandinavian literature, Esaias Tegnér, Norse mythology, Icelandic saga, Viking tale, North and South, Binary opposition

## DOI
10.54432/scand/LCDX6418

The contrast between the North and the South was a recurrent topos in Scandinavian Romantic literature. It is present everywhere: not only in the poetical works of Adam Oehlenschläger, B. S. Ingemann, Esaias Tegnér and P. D. A. Atterbom, but also in the mythological and historical writings of N. F. S. Grundtvig and Erik Gustaf Geijer. It was, of course, nothing unique to Scandinavian literature in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Various manifestations of it are abundant also in German, British and French Romanticism. But in Scandinavia the opposition between the North and the South was of particular importance since it played a crucial role in the Romantic writers' search for a national cultural identity. As Peter Fjågesund points out in the introduction to his magisterial study *The Dream of the North* (2014), one should keep in mind that the cultural development of Scandinavia was closely linked to the relationship with the southern part of Europe and therefore must be understood through this dialectic bond, "not just in terms of strictly material conditions, but more so in terms of ideas, perceptions and views of Self and Other" (Fjågesund 2014: 17).

Here I will briefly touch upon the meaning and function of this imagery in some of Esaias Tegnér's most famous poems. What motivates a study of Tegnér in this regard is not only the frequency of metaphors and symbols connected to the North and the South in his poetry but also his peculiar way of negotiating the contrast or opposition between the two figurative poles.

Outside of Sweden Tegnér is today mainly remembered as the writer of *Frithiofs saga*, an epic poem in twenty-four cantos, which after the publication in its entirety in 1825 was translated into several foreign languages. The German translation of it was praised by none other than Goethe (Werin 1932: 578), and the English version played an important part in the education of the young Queen Victoria (Wawn 2000: 134–36). The tension between the North and the countries in the South is indeed a significant background to this tale of a lawless Viking, who is forced to spend long periods abroad and on one of his journeys gets a glimpse of the ancient temples in Greece. It is partly hidden, however, under a variety of other themes and motifs picked from the old Icelandic sagas and colored by the sentimental moods of contemporary bourgeois society. I will come back to the complex structure of *Frithiofs saga* below, but first focus my attention on a couple of earlier poems by Tegnér, in which the dialectics of North and South is more evident and to a certain extent explicitly discussed.

One finds an elaborate version of the image already in 'Svea' (1811, revised in 1812), the poem for which Tegnér was awarded the great

price of the Swedish Academy and became known to a wider audience. As the title suggests, 'Svea' is a patriotic poem celebrating the national spirit of Sweden in a fairly traditional rhetorical and allegorical manner. It was written shortly after Sweden had lost Finland to Russia, the archenemy in the East, and Tegnér is lamenting the loss while at the same time castigating the Swedish people for being too soft and weak. Above all, he condemns its readiness to embrace and imitate cultural ideals coming from the South.

'Listen to the voice of Nature', the poet demands (Böök & Lundquist 1968: 51). In the warm and pleasant South nature has allowed people to eat, drink, sing and dance without troubling themselves too much about the necessities of life. But no matter how impressive the customs and traditions of the South might seem, they are totally misplaced in the cold and harsh climate of the North. Svea does not need any superficial make-up imported from foreign countries, the poet argues. She can safely rely on the primitive but robust cultural shape "Nature" once gave her.

Paradoxically, the voice of nature here comes from a Frenchman, Montesquieu, whose theories of the climatic conditions of human life were considered standard knowledge in early-Romantic writings. The perfectly shaped Alexandrine couplets in the first part of the poem is another influence from the classical traditions of the South. But in the final part of the poem Tegnér demonstrates the kind of northern cultural heritage he wants to defend. Using a dithyrambic diction, resembling the verse of *Völuspa* in the poetic *Edda*, he presents Svea's forthcoming struggle for freedom and independence in a dreamlike vision, very much like one of the songs of Ossian.

The young Tegnér did not express animosity towards cultures of the South – on the contrary. His poetry had been formed in the Neoclassicist tradition that characterized the reign of Gustav III, and in 1812 he became professor of Greek literature and language at Lund University. The previous year, Tegnér had joined the so-called Geatish Society ("Götiska förbundet"), whose main goal was to revive the knowledge of Norse mythology and make use of it in contemporary literary writing. The society's program was inspired by an ongoing debate about these matters in Denmark. Already in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Swizz historian Paul Henri Mallet had aroused enthusiasm for the Nordic past with his *Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* (1755–56), and in 1802 Oehlenschläger pointed out a new direction for Scandinavian literature with his famous poem about the golden horns.

At first, Tegnér was reluctant about the idea of using motifs, plots and characters from the primitive Icelandic sagas in his poetry. In a letter from 1811 to Jakob Adlerbeth, one of the founders of the Geatish Society, he admits that Nordic mythology is "a powerful and sharply edged poetic form" but objects that it is too "narrow-minded", paying attention only to "the heroic side of life" (Palmborg 1953: 210).[i] Artistic strength and freedom has to be found elsewhere, he suggests, probably thinking of the classical Greek literature (notably Homer and Pindaros) on which he lectured with great enthusiasm at Lund University.

However, reading the latest works by Oehlenschläger and some of his fellow poets in the Geatish Society, Tegnér gradually changed his mind. Particularly impressed by Erik Gustaf Geijer's poem 'Vikingen', published in *Iduna* (the periodical edited by the Geatish Society) in 1811, he set out to write several poems with imagery picked from Old Norse mythology. One of them was 'Skidbladner', in which he tried to reconcile the cultures of the North and the South with the help of a simple but ingenious symbol.

According to the *Prose Edda*, Skidbladner is a magic ship, made by the dwarfs and given to Freyja, the god of fertility. It is large enough to have all the Æsir on board, and yet, taken to pieces, small enough to be carried in the pocket. Probably inspired by B. S. Ingemann's long poem 'Digterskibet', that was published in the same year (1812), Tegnér turns this vessel into a condensed symbol (just as tightly compressed as the Æsir's ship when put into the pocket!) of the unrestrained poetic imagination.

The opening lines of the text express a yearning that supposedly every Scandinavian has felt at times:

> Det är så kraftigt, men så kallt i Norden!
> Längre ner till den bebodda jorden
> längtar du från snö och is,
> dit der drufvan och orangen blommar,
> dit der grönklädd Maj och mognad sommar
> hvila öfver paradis.
> (Böök & Lundquist 1968: 77)

> It is so chilly in the mighty North!
> Lower down, to habitable earth
> Thou wouldest go, from snow and ice,
> Where the vine and orange bless the land;
> Where green-clad May and ripened summer stand,

Lingering over Paradise.
(Bethune 1848: 74)

This longing for the South is something of a cliché not only in Scandinavian but also in German Romantic poetry. The first line is actually borrowed from a poem by Oehlenschläger, but the overall mood in the stanza resembles the feelings in Goethe's well-known 'Mignon' from *Wilhem Meisters Lehrjahre*: "Kennst du das Land? wo die Zitronen blühn".

One might ask oneself, however, what Tegnér more precisely is referring to when he speaks about the "paradise" or "habitable earth" further down. Apparently, "the South" can mean many different things in his early writings. In 'Svea' it probably stands for France, with its refined Classicist art and literature. As becomes evident in the last stanza of 'Skidbladner', Tegnér is here rather thinking of Italy and Greece with their proud traditions from antiquity. In other poems – for example 'Sången' and 'Epilog vid Magister-Promotionen i Lund 1820' – where Tegnér invokes the fresh northern wind in the hope that it will blow away the murky idealism he disliked in a poet like Atterbom, his target is obviously the southern centers of Romanticism in Germany (Werin 1934: 440). Sometimes, when Tegnér in letters and poems sentimentally recalls his childhood in Värmland, "the South" simply means the south of Sweden and his latter-day home in Lund.

From these contradictory meanings of the word one may conclude that "the South" in his imagination has little to do with geography. It is rather the name for an absent place, a place you can either reach for or distance yourself from. Another place than the place where you actually happen to be.

In contrast to many of his contemporaries Tegnér did not pay much attention to actual geography. Following in the footsteps of Goethe, many Scandinavian writers and artists – among them Oehlenschläger, Ingemann and Atterbom – went on long journeys to the south of Europe, notably Italy, in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Tegnér, on the other hand, stayed for most of the time in Sweden. He never went further south than to the healthy springs in Carlsbad, and in his many letters there are no traces of any wish or intention to travel to the Mediterranean region. Maybe he could not afford a "Grand Tour" to the places he often dreamt about in his poetry (in those days a professor's income at the university of Lund was not very impressive), but there were probably other reasons as well.[ii]

In Tegnér's poetry there is very little of the fascination for ancient ruins so typical of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers

to Italy and Greece. In the poem 'Romresan', from the same period as 'Skidbladner', he lets a sensible farmer engage in a dialogue with an adventurous artist setting out on a pilgrimage to Rome. Apart from warning the artist that on his return he will be a stranger in his own country with no hope of earning a living, the farmer points out that beauty can be found everywhere, even in the North, and always must spring forth from the deeper regions of the artist's mind.

Instead of actually travelling to the South one could, in other words, use one's imagination. What is "Reality"? the poet asks in 'Skidbladner'. Not the everyday life you have right in front of your eyes. The real is what you see in your dreams and know in your heart. Therefore, you should only trust your imagination and let the magic ship of poetry take you wherever you please:

> Låt blott konsten lyfta Er ur gruset!
> Vidsträckt är hon, såsom himlaljuset,
> och som hafvets våg så fri.
>
> Se, Skidbladner vinkar dig vid stranden.
> Öfver hafven, öfver landen
> diktens gyllne skepp går fram.
> [...]
>
> Väl, så stig med lust på spegeldäcket.
> Som en morgondimma faller täcket
> ifrån andeverlden; hon är din.
> (Böök & Lundquist 1968: 77–78)

> Trust but in Poesy to wing your flight;
> It may be boundless, as the heaven's own light,
> And as ocean's waters free.
>
> Behold! Skidbladner hails you from the shore;
> The golden ship of fancy can explore
> Every sea and every land.
> […]
> Climb the polished deck whene'er you list.
> From the Spirit-world, like morning mist,
> Falls the veil; it is your own.
> (Bethune 1848: 75)

There is, then, no reason to flee from the chilly North or long for a promised land in the South. Thanks to the visionary eye of poetry you can visit Hesperia and Hellas whenever you like:

> Derför längta icke mer från Norden.
> Skönheten är vansklig uppå jorden,
> endast dikten hör hon evigt till.
> Hvar som heldst du må af ödet ställas,
> finns Hesperien, finns Hellas
> för din syn, så snart du vill.
> (Böök & Lundquist: 78)

> Then pine not to forsake the chilly North.
> The fleeting glories of the natural earth
> To Art eternally belong;
> And, wheresoever fate hath set your home,
> Fair Hellas and Hesperia will come,
> New created by your song.
> (Bethune 1848: 76)

What Tegnér has in mind is, of course, not only that our imagination can take us to distant geographical places but also that poetry can transgress the *cultural* barriers between various parts of the world. A poem using images from Norse mythology – like 'Skidbladner' – can do the same job with the same artistic effect as a poem using Greek mythology or other classical patterns. As long as its language and form are beautiful, *all* poetry, no matter its cultural origin, will reflect the same eternal ideas.

This was an argument put forward already by Oehlenschläger in his poem 'Digterens hjem', which Tegnér congenially translated into Swedish shortly after it was published in 1811. Here the poet is described as a noble stranger or visitor who easily accommodates himself everywhere in the world, not only in the South and the North but also in the West and the East, and finally returns to his eternal home in Heaven. Tegnér repeats the argument in a poem entitled 'Svanen och Fjelltrasten', where he puts a thrush from the Nordic wilderness in contrast with a Swan from some lake in the pleasant South. Although the rough sounds of the thrush cannot compete with the perfectly drilled tones of the Swan, they both serve art as nature has taught them, that is in the best way they can. Even if the forms of

art are many, its essence is one and the same, concludes the offended but philosophically confident thrush.

Tegnér continues his reflections on poetic writing as a kind of voyage in another allegorical poem from 1812, 'Flyttfåglarna', in which birds – this time birds of passage – once again serve as the main symbol. In accordance with the conclusions of 'Skidbladner' and 'Svanen och Fjelltrasten', the voyage is now no longer described as a movement in one direction only, from the North to the South, but as a rhythmical movement back and forth *between* the North and the South. "Mot Norden! mot Norden!" (To the North, to the North!), the birds shout when they get tired of the burning sun at the banks of the Nile. "Mot Söder! mot Söder! (To the South! to the South!), they scream when they feel the coming of winter in the highlands of Sweden. One gets a hint of this idea also in Tegnér's translation of Oehlenschläger's 'Digterens hjem', where the first lines make clear that the poet has his dwelling "emellan norr och söder" (in between the North and the South) and thus a homeland as vast as the Earth (Böök & Lundquist 1968: 47).

According to Tegnér's biographer Fredrik Böök, 'Flyttfåglarna' illustrates the unlimited freedom of poetic imagination (Böök 1913: 4), and there is certainly much that supports such an interpretation. Practically all poems by Tegnér from 1812–13 discuss nature and the practice of poetic writing. They are indeed meta-poems. Contrary to many of the other texts, there are no explicit references to literature in 'Flyttfåglarna', but it is by no means difficult to find striking similarities between the feathered animals in this poem and literary artists. Just as the migrating birds, writers are able to soar high above the empirical world, ignoring both the laws of nature and the social or political problems in society, and like the birds they can therefore feel at home wherever they happen to set their feet:

> Och djupt under föttren vi som en graf
> den grönskande jorden, der blånande haf,
> der oron och stormen hvar dag sig förnyar,
> men vi fara fria med himmelens skyar.
> (Böök & Lundquist 1968: 79)

> Far under our feet like a grave can be seen
> The sea turning azure, the earth going green.
> Where storm and uneasiness trouble each day,
> But whe're for the clouds again, free and away.
> (Moffett 2001: 9)

Böök compares 'Flyttfåglarna' with poems using the same motif – and indeed having the same title – by Erik Johan Stagnelius, Johan Ludvig Runeberg and Per Hallström (Böök 1913: 21–60). Pointing to the striking similarities between these poems and that of Tegnér he argues that the younger writers were deeply inspired by the imagery of their great predecessor. What Böök pays special attention to, however, is in what way the various interpretations of the bird symbol differ from each other. To the late Romantic Stagnelius, with his paradoxical leaning towards both sensuality and metaphysical brooding, the birds' yearning for the South became a symbol of the soul's longing for a transcendent reality. To the realist-idealist Runeberg, renowned for his strong patriotism, the birds' flight to the North came to signify the return to an "eternal" home beyond all conflicts in life. To the early-Modernist Hallström, the perpetual movement of the birds illustrated the anxiety of distressed and problematic individuals looking for a refuge in the modern world. Only Tegnér regarded the birds' flight from the North to the South and back again as a joyful expression of freedom, Böök maintains.

More closely related to Tegnér's view of the poetic imagination is perhaps Selma Lagerlöf's use of the same motif in her famous story about Nils Holgersson. Originally conceived as a geography textbook for schoolchildren, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* became, shortly after it was published in 1906–7, one of the most popular books of fiction in Swedish literature and widely known abroad. What made it so popular was, not least, the narrative device of letting a young boy explore the country by travelling high above its various landscapes on the back of a goose. Presumably that idea originated from Lagerlöf's acquaintance with 'Flyttfåglarna'. After first having gone north, Akka and the other wild geese in the story decide to turn back when it starts to get cold, quoting the famous refrain from Tegnér's poem – "Mot söder! Mot söder!" (Lagerlöf 2005: 537) – and on their way to the South they make a stop at Lagerlöf's childhood home in Värmland, where the narrator recalls how the family once used to gather at the evenings reading books by Tegnér among others (Lagerlöf 2005: 577).

In one important respect Böök's interpretation of 'Flyttfåglarna' must be corrected, though. Migrating birds are not entirely free when they periodically move from one continent to the other. In fact, they are forced to behave in accordance with their natural instincts and therefore trapped in an endless movement back and forth. Neither is the imagination of a poet as happily unconstrained as Böök seems to suggest. It is to a certain extent free vis a vis the ordinary world or empirical reality, but it cannot escape the aesthetic rules or

conventions that exist in a given society. To ignore these conventions would simply mean to risk not producing high poetry or indeed any literature at all. Tegnér was fully aware of that risk when he decided to distance himself from Neoclassicism and start using motifs, symbols and metrical forms from the old Icelandic literature, which is part of the reason why so many of his poems from the 1810s contain reflections about artistic creativity in general and poetic writing in particular.

That is also why Tegnér never abandoned the Classicist tradition altogether and often criticized contemporary poets like Atterbom for going too far in the direction of German Romanticism. Just like the migrating birds in 'Flyttfåglarna' Tegnér's poetics remained in a constant oscillation between the North and the South. This ambition to fulfil the requirements of two opposed aesthetic systems was already present in 'Svea', but nowhere did Tegnér better succeed in creating a comprehensive synthesis of them than in his masterpiece *Frithiofs saga*.

Tegnér's poem about Frithiof is actually a paraphrase of an authentic Icelandic "fornaldarsaga" from the late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century, published in E. J. Biörner's collection *Nordiska Kämpa Dater* (1737). His own version of the tale is remarkably faithful to the original, reusing not only its main characters and intrigue but also some of its style and imagery. The main differences consist of Tegnér's attempt to supply the characters with psychological depth, his ambition to dramatise and embellish the events of the story and his effort to create a happy ending, centered around the resurrection of the temple consecrated to Balder, in which the heathen Norse mythology is reconciled with contemporary Christian faith. All in all, these modifications were intended to result in a "modernisation" of the old saga.

Another early expert on Tegnér's poetry, Albert Nilsson, has demonstrated, however, that the modernization of the tale runs parallel with a "hellenisation" of the epic material (Nilsson 1928: 122–157). Even in the original saga there are visible traces from the Homeric epics, probably due to influences from the Mediterranean and Byzantine cultures with which the perpetually travelling Norsemen had got in touch, and Tegnér, with his profound knowledge of Greek literature, deliberately enhanced these elements while also adding further allusions to the classical pattern.

On a formal level one notes that *Frithiofs saga* is composed of twenty-four cantos, just like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and much in line with the Homeric models (but in contrast to the Icelandic tale) ends

with a harmonic reconciliation. Tegnér also makes use of hexameter in his poem, especially when describing symbolic artefacts, for example the sword and the arm-ring that Frithiof inherits from his father, in the manner of Homer's famous rendering of the pictures on Achilles' shield. More important than the structural and metrical borrowings, though, are the thematic influences from Homer.

When Frithiof is denied a marriage to Ingeborg, his great love since childhood but the daughter of King Bele and thus of a higher social position, he falls into a rage very much resembling the proverbial wrath of Achilles in the beginning of *The Iliad*. Like Achilles, Frithiof is highly esteemed as a warrior but isolates himself in his anger and refuses to take part in the battle with King Ring when his compatriots, led by Ingeborg's two nasty brothers, are in desperate need of his help. Frithiof's battling with sea-monsters on his dangerous mission to Angantyr, a warlord on the Orkney islands, is, for its part, clearly inspired by similar adventures in *The Odyssey*. So is Frithiof's dramatic homecoming, during which he is trying to approach Ingeborg, now married to King Ring against her will, cleverly disguised as a beggar.

According to Albert Nilsson, the influence of classical Greek literature on *Fritiofs saga* goes even deeper. The serious crime for which Frithiof has to atone by rebuilding the temple of Balder might be understood as an example of *hubris*, a standard notion in the Greek tragedies (Nilsson 1928: 214). If Frithiof is something of a Nordic Achilles, the timid and stoic Ingeborg could, in her turn, be seen as a Nordic counterpart to the Greek maid in some of Sophocles' or Euripides' plays, a repressed yet heroic woman who willingly sacrifices herself to the Gods or for the common good of the state, Nilsson argues (Nilsson 1928: 231–32).

Taking all these references to Greek culture into consideration it is no wonder that Frithiof now and then dreams of the ancient world in the South. His father, who had travelled widely around the world on Viking campaigns, once told him about the beautiful islands and monuments in Greece, and in the vain hope of not being separated from his beloved, Frithiof fantasises about settling there with Ingeborg, creating a North in miniature, as it were, among the deserted ruins and fecund groves:

> Ett mäktigt slägte bodde fordom der
> och höga Gudar uti marmortempel.
> Nu stå de öfvergifna, gräset frodas
> å öde stigar, och en blomma växer
> ur runorna som tala forntids vishet,

och smärta pelarstammar grönska der
omlindade af söderns rika rankor.
Men rundt omkring bär jorden af sig sjelf,
en osådd skörd, hvad menniskan behöfver,
och gyllne äpplen glöda mellan löfven,
och röda drufvor hänga på hvar gren
och svälla yppiga som dina läppar.
Der, Ingeborg, der bygga vi i vågen
ett litet Norden skönare än här,
och med vår trogna kärlek fylla vi
de lätta tempelhvalfven, fägna än
med mensklig lycka de förgätna Gudar.
(Lundquist 1986: 53)

Of old, a mighty race liv'd there, and Gods
Still mightier dwelt in marble sanctuaries. –
Now stand They desolate: wild luxuriant herbage
O'erspreads their lonely avenues, flow'rs shoot
From Runes which speak of wise antiquity,
And rich-curl'd tendrils of the vineyard South
Slim columns circle with their green embrace.
But round these ruins, in unsown harvest-crops,
Gives the untouch'd Earth all man can want or wish;
While fresh leaves glow with clust'ring golden apples,
And bending boughs full purple grapes weigh down
All tempting, rich, and juicy as – thy lips!
There Ing'borg, 'mid that sea's bright waves, we'll stablish
A little North more beautiful than this;
Those slender Temple-arches will we fill
With faithful love, and entertain again
Forgotten Gods with human happiness.
(Stephens 1839: 80)

Dependent on her brothers' decisions Ingeborg cannot follow him to this promised land, however, and when Frithiof later in the tale explores the Greek archipelago himself on one of his voyages as a rootless Viking, his gloomy thoughts wander back to the cruel woman left behind in the North:

Här vi skulle ha bott, här är ö, här är lund, här är templet min

> fader beskref:
> det var hit, det var hit jag den älskade bjöd, men den hårda i
> Norden förblef.
> (Lundquist 1986: 105)
>
> Here our dwelling had been! Here's the isle, here's the land; of this Temple my Sire oft would tell;
> Hither 'twas, hither 'twas, I invited my Maid; – ah! She, cruel, the North lov'd too well!
> (Stephens 1839: 151)

There is evidently not much in terms of realism in passages such as these. Rather than originating from actual impressions of reality they are a consequence of the fact that Tegnér in his poetic writing opposes two cultures or literary traditions. Far from being geographical notions "the North" and "the South" are the names of two extreme poles in Tegnér's poetics, albeit often skillfully embodied and entwined in his texts.

One might still ask, though, why Tegnér, as the migrating birds or the unruly Frithiof, has a tendency to move back and forth between these positions, not being able to rest at either one of them. If the words "north" and "south" in Tegnér's writings seldom refer to any specific geographic locations, it would be equally wrong to see them as rhetorical tropes in line with metaphors or symbols. Working always dialectically together they form what Claude Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists used to call a "binary opposition". As such they are closely connected to a whole range of other binaries: Nature versus Culture, Masculine versus Feminine, the Spiritual versus the Material, Life versus Death, etc. Tegnér makes use of them in order to develop, elaborate and structure other kinds of ideas and images in his poetry. They are, in other words, not a *result* of his poetic imagination but a *precondition* for it, and so was perhaps, on a more general level, the tension between Classicism and Romanticism in his poetics.

This tendency to think and write in opposites might be explained by the fact that Tegnér lived and worked during a period of turbulent transition in Europe. His lifetime (1782–1846) more or less coincides with the era Eric Hobsbawm has baptized "the Age of Revolution" (Hobsbawm 1962), and it seems only logical that the clash between traditional and modern political, philosophical and aesthetic views during that era left deep traces in his literary works. As Böök's analysis of 'Flyttfåglarna' suggests, however, the oscillation between opposite

poles seems to be a more important element in Tegnér's poetry than in the works of his contemporaries, and the explanation of that should perhaps be searched for on a more personal and psychological level of his writing.

Shortly after he had finished *Frithiofs saga* Tegnér fell into a deep depression that in graphic detail is described in his dark and melancholic poem 'Mjeltsjukan' (1825–26). He recovered from his mental paralysis and managed to pursue his duties as a bishop in Växjö for many years thereafter, but melancholic moods kept haunting him, and towards the end of his life he was forced to spend long periods at a mental hospital in Schleswig. Both literary scholars and psychiatrists have asked themselves what kind of mental illness he suffered from, and some of the earliest medically informed opinions pointed to "manic depression", or what we today would call "bipolar disorder", as a possible answer (Werin 1934: 566).[iii] That could of course explain not only the swinging moods in Tegnér's personality, well documented in many of his letters, but also his tendency to write poems based on binary oppositions.

There is every reason to be skeptical of literary interpretations that, under the influence of a Romantic tradition, tend to see the conflicts in a poet's mind as a tragic but sometimes inevitable flaw. As Carl Fehrman has argued, "the duplicity and tension" in Tegner´s temper may well have contributed to his greatness both as a man and as a writer (Fehrman 1961: 32). One of today's experts on Swedish literary Romanticism, Peter Henning, goes even further when he, in an article from 2018, suggests that the "binary dialectics" of Tegnér is actually inscribed in a *circular* structure that, contrary to the Romantic notions of a split subject and a transcendent reality, affirms life as an altogether immanent totality (Henning 2018: 103–6). Something of that idea was, perhaps, present already in Böök's analysis of 'Flyttfåglarna', with its emphasis on the repetitive and rhythmic pattern both of the birds' seasonal migration and of the poem itself.

Be that as it may, there is one, rather odd poem by Tegnér, printed in *Iduna* in 1817, that very well illustrates his compulsion to see the world as a force field between two poles on a vertical axis. It is called 'Polar-resan' and tells the story of a scientist travelling to the North Pole in the hope of finding an answer to all his existential questions. Probably well informed about contemporary expeditions to the wilderness in the North, Tegnér knew that compasses cannot work properly in the vicinity of the Pole. That is also the final and insoluble problem with which the struggling scientist in his poem is confronted. Standing at the North Pole he loses all sense of direction, and not

knowing what is north and south any longer, not being able to orient himself in the world or to structure the world in a coherent way, he freezes to death.

## Bibliography


Bethune, J. E. D. (1848), *Specimens of Swedish and German Poetry*, London: John Murray.

Böök, F. (1913), "Flyttfåglarna", in *Svenska studier i litteraturvetenskap*, Stockholm: Norstedts förlag.

Böök, F. and Lundquist, Å. K. G. (eds.) (1968), *Esaias Tegnérs samlade dikter*, Vol. 2, Lund: Gleerups förlag.

Fehrman, C. (1961), "Tegnér och melankoliens landskap", in *Tegnérstudier 1960*, Lund: Gleerups förlag, pp. 7–32.

Fehrman, C. (1996), "Esaias Tegnér inför psykiatrin. Ett stycke medicinsk litteraturhistoria", in Törnqvist, U. (ed.), *Möten med Tegnér*, Lund: Tegnérsamfundet, pp. 136–176.

Fjågesund, P. (2014), *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.

Henning, P. (2018), "Tegnérs cirklar", in Sjödin, A. and Svensson, J. (eds.), *Efter Tegnér. Experiment med traditionen*, Lund: Lunds universitet, Media-tryck, pp. 85–107.

Hobsbawm, E. (1962), *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Lagerlöf, S. (2005), *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa*, Stockholm: Bonniers förlag.

Lundquist, Å. K. G. (ed.) (1986) *Esaias Tegnérs samlade dikter*, Vol. 4, Lund: Tegnérsamfundet.

Moffett, J. (2001), *The North! To the North": Five Swedish Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Nilsson, A. (1928), *Tre fornnordiska gestalter. Helge, Frithiof och Kung Fjalar*, Lund: Gleerups förlag.

Palmborg, N. (ed.) (1953), *Esaias Tegnérs brev*, Vol. 1, Malmö: Allhems förlag.

Persson, Malte (2013) *Att inte resa till Italien – om syd och nord hos Tegnér*, Tegnérsamfundets årsskrift, Malmö: Tegnérsamfundet.

Svensson, C. (2012), *Diktaren på dårhuset. Om Esaias Tegnér's sjukdom och sjukdomsdiktning*, Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag.

Stephens, G. (1839), *Frithiof's Saga: A Legend of the North*, Stockholm: Bonnier; London: Black and Armstrong.

Wawn, A. (2000), *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain,* Rochester: Boydell and Brewer.
Werin, A. (1932), ”Goethe och Tegnér”, *Ord och bild*, No. 11, pp. 575–586.
Werin, A. (1934), *Esaias Tegnér. Från Det eviga till Mjältsjukan*, Lund: Gleerups förlag.

i My translation.

ii Why Tegnér never went to the south of Europe, despite his lifelong obsession with the Mediterranean culture, is a question cleverly discussed by Malte Persson in a published lecture entitled *Att inte resa till Italien – om syd och nord hos Tegnér* (2013). The overall argumentation in my own article is inspired by some of Persson’s brilliant observations.

iii For more thorough and up-to-date analyses of Tegnér’s mental disorder, see Fehrman 1996: 136–176 and Svensson 2012.