

*Frederick Hale*

### **The South African Immorality Act and Sara Lidman's *Jag och min son?***

Scandinavian reactions to apartheid in South Africa were almost universally negative since that term for pervasive racial segregation was coined in the late 1940s. Specifically, journalistic criticism of the National Party, which acceded to power in 1948 and shortly thereafter began to implement its racist programme of social engineering, has always been severe. Prior to the 1960s, however, political and economic ties between the Nordic countries and South Africa remained generally amiable if rarely cordial. Trade was unimpeded, and dozens of Scandinavian companies occupied spaces in the industrial and commercial landscape of South Africa while enough ships of Nordic registry called at Durban and Cape Town to justify the existence of seamen's missions for their crews in both ports. During the 1960s, though, relations began to sour notably. The legislative bodies of the Scandinavian countries gradually imposed restrictions on commercial links; missionary staffs in South Africa dwindled; and the public image of the Nationalist regime in Pretoria went from bad to virtually demonic. Eventually Scandinavian Airways System cancelled its flights to Johannesburg and, at least on an officially acknowledged level, trade ground to a halt. The Nordic countries, especially Sweden, gained a reputation amongst white South Africans as being some of the most uncompromising international foes of white minority rule.

It is not difficult to identify several factors for this worsening of relations around 1960. One of the most obvious is the global reaction

to the massacre at Sharpeville in March of that year, when South African policemen shot several dozen unarmed blacks who were protesting against the notorious pass laws. Less than a year later, however, another sensitive incident directly involving a prominent Swedish citizen's suffering because of racist legislation and, from a Swedish viewpoint, the lack of due process of law, exacerbated tensions and undoubtedly confirmed rapidly hardening Scandinavian opinions about South Africa. That person was Sara Lidman, who had already carved out her niche in the literary history of Sweden. The affair also provided part of the motivation for and a central theme of her novel *Jag och min son*, which represented a significant step in the thematic development of this *littérateur*. Neither historians of Scandinavian literature nor those of South African politics and jurisprudence have ever given this case or the novel its due. Well before the end of the 1960s Lidman's literary and political interests had shifted to other spheres, and scholarly interest in her similarly focused on her involvement in other parts of the world, such as Viet Nam. Indeed, not until one of Lidman's South African acquaintances, author Nadine Gordimer, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991 did the difficulties which this highly respected Swedish writer had encountered in Johannesburg again gain public attention. In the meantime, references to her *tryst* there occurred from time to time in political diction, and in Odd Kvaal Pedersen's well-received novel of 1980 about southern Africa, *Dobbel frukt*, there is an unmistakable if misleading allusion to Lidman as a "kjent skandinav [...] som vakte oppstyr fordi hun ulovlig gikk til sengs med en farget" (p. 56). On the whole, however, the affair remains one of the many lacunae in scholarly considerations of Lidman and her authorship.

Several fields of scholarship can benefit from an examination of Lidman's generally neglected case in South Africa. It sheds additional light not only on central themes in *Jag och min son* as such but also on such matters as enforcement of the Immorality Act, legal procedures in South Africa, the rôle of the press in dealing with violations of apartheid laws and racial oppression in general, and the processes whereby the international image of South Africa continued to decline in

the wake of the Sharpeville massacre. On a theoretical level, moreover, an analysis of some of Lidman's perspectives challenges the applicability of current theories of the function of racial stereotypes in colonial discourse, a topic with which we can deal only briefly in the present study.

At the time of her stay in South Africa, Lidman was thirty-seven years old and the author of half a dozen generally well-regarded novels and pieces for the theatre. Less than a decade had passed since the publication of her lauded debut novel, *Tjärdalen*, in 1953, but she was nevertheless a fixture on the cultural landscape of Sweden. Her arrest for violation of the Immorality Act in February 1961 consequently received a great deal of journalistic notice in South Africa, caused a furore in Sweden, and marked a turning point in Lidman's career. Her case thus merits considerably more scholarly attention than it has hitherto received.

That Lidman excoriated apartheid was not in itself a new departure in Swedish literature. To be sure, during the 1950s Swedish writers of fiction and nonfiction alike had subjected the South African government and its racial policies to a crescendo of criticism. The novelty in the Lidman case lay in the fact that it involved the direct participation of an eminent Swede, one who would subsequently write about her experiences at the hands of the judicial system for overstepping the legal bounds of apartheid.

The place of the Lidman case in Swedish literary history and the devolution of South Africa's image in Sweden cannot be comprehended without some awareness of prevailing attitudes towards the former country and particularly its socio-political system in Sweden prior to and during the 1950s. By that time the fictional and nonfictional works of many domestic and foreign writers had quickened the consciences of Swedes with regard to racism in the African sub-continent. Alan Paton's first novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, had appeared in Swedish as *På lösan sand* in 1949, and his second, *Too Late the Phalarope*, came out as *Järnhård är lagen* five years later. Peter Lanham's *Blanket Boy's Moon* (1953) appeared under the title *Svart mans måne* the same year, and Nadine Gordimer gained a foothold in Sweden in 1955 when her

first novel, *The Lying Days*, published in South Africa two years earlier, was offered to Swedish readers under the title *Lögnens dagar*. Harry Bloom's *Episode in the Transvaal* (1956) appeared as *Det hände i Transvaal* in 1957. The internationally recognized nonfictional critique, *Naught for Your Comfort*, by the legendary Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston was published in Swedish as *Natten är nära* in 1956.

Few Swedes, however, had written contemporary fiction about South Africa. One exception was Gunnar Helander (b. 1915), who had served the Church of Sweden Mission in both rural Natal and Johannesburg from 1938 until 1956. In 1949 appeared the first of his seven novels set in South Africa, *Zulu möter vit man*. Endast för vita had followed three years later, *Storstadsneger* in 1955, and *Det nya kom från negern* in 1959. The extent to which these middling works shaped Swedish opinion is impossible to gauge. In a Swedish government report published in 1978, Helander is credited with being one of the first significant prophetic voices in this regard, although that appraisal appears to rest on his essays and public speaking, not on his fiction.<sup>1</sup> His criticism of apartheid gained unprecedented attention in Sweden during his protracted public controversy with the South African Legation in Stockholm after he returned to his homeland on furlough in 1956 and was supposedly unable to get a long-term visa for another period of residence in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Swedish journalists had taken up their lances with increasing frequency in this general campaign. In one particularly noteworthy charge, Herbert Tingsten, the editor-in-chief of the independent Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter*, published his critical volume *Problemet Sydafrika* in 1954 after visiting South Africa and availing himself of Helander's hospitality and expertise in Johannesburg.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> *Förbud mot investeringar i Sydafrika* (Stockholm: Statens offentliga utredningar. 1978:53. Handelsdepartementet), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> The most detailed analysis of Helander's literary career, focusing on his campaign against apartheid, is Frederick Hale, "Ethnic Characterisation, Missiological Issues, and the Evolution of Social Ethics in the South African Novels of Gunnar Helander" (Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Natal, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Gunnar Helander, Uppsala, 29 November 1990.

forced removal of tens of thousands of blacks from Sophiatown, a poor area of that city where Huddleston worked, in February 1955 brought Swedish journalistic criticism of official South African racist policies to new heights. The government's action in quelling protests against this move was labelled "police violence" in the Swedish press.<sup>4</sup> So barbed did condemnation of the South African government become during the middle and late 1950s, not least in *Dagens Nyheter*, that when the young Swedish *littérateur* Per Wästberg visited Cape Town at the end of the decade imperious Minister of Information Piet Meiring told him unambiguously that "we are in a pure hell because of the Scandinavian press" and asserted that "everyone in the [South African] government naturally realizes that Tjingsten is a mentally ill hater."<sup>5</sup>

Wästberg's highly critical nonfictional volume about South Africa, *På svarta listan*, appeared in 1960. By his own account, he was instrumental in convincing his colleague Lidman to travel to South Africa later that year.<sup>6</sup> She was at that time an established writer with four well-received novels, two dramas, and various shorter works to her credit, although she had yet to enter the international arena artistically or politically. Lidman's second novel, *Hjortronlandet*, had gained wide recognition in 1955. As part of a wave of regional Swedish literature, both this work and *Tjärdalen* were set in her native northern Sweden during the 1930s and deal with complexities of human nature, involving conscience, guilt feelings, mercy, hypocrisy, and mental illness. Biblical allusions and a noteworthy measure of moralism add to the flavour of these first two novels. In 1958 and 1960 came *Regnspiran* and *Bära mistel*, her "Linda books" which trace the development of protagonist Linda Ståhl through an emotionally and morally burdened childhood through ostracism and demonic acts to personal atonement through expiation and compassion. These volumes are also set in northern Sweden and faithfully reflect the mentality and dialects of its provincial

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<sup>4</sup> For an incisive example of the severest Swedish journalistic coverage of the Sophiatown removals, see *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 February 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Per Wästberg, *På svarta listan* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1960), p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Hale Private Archives, Swedish Literary History files, Per Wästberg (Stockholm) to Frederick Hale, 22 December 1990.

population. The personal emphasis is usually on social outsiders rather than esteemed burghers. All four novels focus on individuals and small communities; the political dimension is absent from them.

Lidman's sojourn to South Africa a few months after the massacre at Sharpeville in 1960 thus promised fresh inspiration and represented a new phase in her personal life and literary career. The change of venue from northern Sweden and Stockholm to the Southern Hemisphere, from the relative homogeneity of Sweden to the vast ethnic and cultural pluralism of the African sub-continent, and from the "social welfare state" to the almost unbridled capitalism of South Africa under the governance of National Party politicians made new impulses inevitable.

Lidman arrived at Johannesburg on 24 August 1960, reportedly with the intention of remaining for at least two years to learn Zulu and study contemporary South African social problems. There is no evidence that she intended to write a novel in the short term. Lidman's residence permit was valid only until 28 February 1961.<sup>7</sup> She left Johannesburg shortly after landing in the country and stayed briefly at a Swedish Lutheran mission station in Dundee, a small industrial and mining city in the province of Natal. Lidman then spent time in Pietermaritzburg before returning to Johannesburg around the beginning of 1961. There she hired from a German clergyman who was leaving for a furlough in Europe a two-roomed, third-storey flat in the Bellevue section of the city and spent most of her time during the next several weeks doing research, meeting people, and writing in and near Johannesburg. At some point Lidman, then a divorcée, developed a close friendship with Peter Nthite. A widower and proprietor of a co-operative store, this Tswana man was approximately three years her junior and a resident of the black township of Orlando West Extension, subsequently part of Soweto. Nthite, a veteran of the Defiance Campaign against the unfolding of apartheid during the 1950s who had been arrested earlier for violation of segregationist laws, was a former secretary of the

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<sup>7</sup> Cape Archives Depot, Principal Immigration Officer, vol. 2201, ref. 95819E, W.G. Mitchell (Pretoria) to The Principal Immigration Officer, Johannesburg, 24 February 1961.

banned African National Congress Youth Movement and as such immediately suspect in the eyes of white South Africans.

Lidman's relationship with Nthite became a public scandal when police, apparently acting on an anonymous tip, entered the hired flat on 3 February and found them together. The two lovers were arrested and taken to jail for the night. The following day they appeared in the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court but were released after posting bail of £50 each. Nthite and Lidman were ordered to return for trial on 15 February.<sup>8</sup>

Both were charged with violation of the Immorality Act. This statute, originally enacted in 1927, forbade extramarital sexual relations between people of European ancestry and black Africans. Each of the Union's four provinces had previously passed similar laws, but the Immorality Act unified the ban on a national basis. In 1950 it was augmented to outlaw all sexual relations between whites and non-whites, and seven years later the statute was further amended to allow the prosecution of both participants and to cover all sexual acts, not merely intercourse and foreplay. One provision allowed for the prosecution on a charge of conspiracy to commit immoral acts by whites and non-whites who were apprehended in the same place of residence or even in an automobile together at night. In theory the punishment could be a maximum of seven years' imprisonment, although in practice first-time offenders were given suspended sentences. During the early 1960s there were several hundred convictions annually, the majority of them reportedly involving prostitution.

In South African literary history, the Immorality Act and the attitudes surrounding interracial sexual intercourse are best known for providing the basis for Alan Paton's novel of 1953, *Too Late the Phalarope*. In Swedish literature, this statute plays a major rôle in Helander's novel of the previous year, *Svart symfoni*, in which a German farmer in Natal impregnates a Zulu employee but escapes with

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<sup>8</sup> "Woman in morals case 'so upset'", *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 10 February 1961, p. 1.

impunity.

Coverage of the Lidman case in both the English and Afrikaans press of South Africa did not begin until almost after a week after Lidman and Nthite were arrested, although for several days it was first-page material in the newspapers of the major cities. Articles about the case were by and large factual rather than tendentious, though not without either slightly titillating elements or a general lack of reliability. Prosecutions for violation of the Immorality Act occurred so frequently at that time that few journalists paid them much heed. Had the case not been reported and aroused a storm of protest in Sweden, it is questionable whether it would have received any journalistic coverage in South Africa. The first articles about it in the South African press, in fact, were written by South African correspondents in Stockholm who obviously understood the value of the incident as sensationalism.<sup>9</sup> In at least one published account, Lidman was mistakenly called a “journalist”.<sup>10</sup> No-one who actually was in that profession in South Africa could have reasonably been expected to have the slightest familiarity with her literary career, and journalists’ attempts to describe it suffered accordingly. One went so far as to assert that the northern Swedish dialect in which Lidman had written much of the dialogue in her novels “makes her books difficult even for other Swedes to understand”.<sup>11</sup>

South African journalists gave Lidman no peace and refused to respect her privacy during the next week. They kept her flat under almost constant surveillance, interviewed her neighbors, and probed her friends in search of details of the woman and her case. Readers of the first pages of daily newspapers in Johannesburg and other South African cities thus learned that Lidman “has been so upset that she has had hardly any food since Saturday”,<sup>12</sup> that she was refusing “to see

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<sup>9</sup> “Authoress on Morals Charge”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 9 February 1961; “Flat arrest of Woman Visitor”, *Cape Times* (Cape Town), 9 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Sara Lidman makes surprise appearance”, *The Star* (Johannesburg), 14 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Novelist Will See Only Close Friends”, *Cape Times*, 10 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Woman in morals case ‘so upset’”, p. 1.



anyone except her closest friends” and had not left her flat for five days,<sup>13</sup> that she had disconnected both her doorbell and her telephone, and that after five days she had finally ended her seclusion. No editor appears to have published the address of the flat, but it was announced that it was a “comfortable” one in Bellevue which Lidman had sub-let from a German clergyman.<sup>14</sup>

Legal machinations burdened Lidman for three weeks. After she and Nthite initially appeared in court and remanded until 15 February, they were brought back on 14 February in what was reportedly a “surprise appearance . . . on the Attorney General’s instructions”. At that time the indicted couple were bound over to a regional court for trial on 7 March.<sup>15</sup> In a move probably intended to avoid further international embarrassment to the South African government, however, the prosecutor, S.E. Krynauw, announced on 24 February that on instructions from the Attorney-General the charge against Lidman was being withdrawn.<sup>16</sup> It was reported in the South African daily press that she was leaving the country voluntarily and had chosen not to seek renewal of her visa.<sup>17</sup> In fact, on 24 February W.G. Mitchell, the Director of Immigration and Asiatic Affairs in Pretoria, had informed the Principal Immigration Officer in Johannesburg not to extend Lidman’s visa without special permission from himself.<sup>18</sup> She left Johannesburg on a flight for Dar-es-Salaam on 25 February.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “Novelist Will See Only Close Friends”, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> “Novelist Slips Out of Her Flat”, *Cape Times*, 11 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> “Novelist in Court”, *Cape Times*, 15 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> “Saak teen Sara Lidman Teruggetrek”, *Die Burger* (Cape Town), 25 February 1961, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> “Mrs. Sara Lidman leaves today”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Cape Archives Depot, Principal Immigration Officer, vol. 2201, ref. 95819E., W.G. Mitchell (Pretoria) to The Principal Immigration Officer, Johannesburg, 24 February 1961.

<sup>19</sup> “Novelist Quits SA To-day”, *Cape Times*, 25 February 1961, p. 2. The Swedish literary scholar Raoul Granqvist incorrectly stated that Lidman was deported from South Africa and that this took place in March 1961; see Raoul Granqvist, “Den litterära bilden af Afrika i Sverige under femtio- och sextioalet: Artur Lundkvist och Per Wästbergs perspektiv”, *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, XIV, no. 3 (1985), p. 35, n. 8.

Throughout much of the ordeal, Lidman had the active support of her government and of other Swedes in the Transvaal. The Swedish consul in Johannesburg, C.A. Klinglund, visited her on 10 February at the flat she had hired, and the Swedish minister for South Africa travelled from Cape Town to Johannesburg to do likewise.<sup>20</sup> When reporters in effect hounded her out of the flat, Lidman found a safe haven in the home of Rev. J.E. Hallendorff, a veteran Swedish Lutheran missionary.

Practically from the outset, the South African press, including both newspapers which supported the government of H.F. Verwoerd and some which opposed it, showed concern about the international political ramifications of the case. “Internasionale Insident Dreig Oor Kleur”, screamed the headline in the respected pro-government Afrikaans newspaper *Die Burger* in its first cover of the matter on 9 February: “International Incident Threatens Over Color”. Again and again editors placed on their front pages articles about the responses of the Swedish government, press, and politicians to the case. It was widely reported, for instance, that a communist member of parliament, Gustav Johansson, had demanded that the regime in Stockholm take special measures to defend Lidman.<sup>21</sup> *The Star* of Johannesburg reported on 11 February that the case had received great press coverage in Scandinavia, where it had again actualized the question of a trade boycott of South Africa. That country had been “bitterly assailed” in Scandinavia.<sup>22</sup>

In one instance this reached highly speculative proportions. Margaret Smith of the respected *Sunday Times* of Johannesburg, to whom Lidman had granted an exclusive interview at the Hallendorff residence the evening before her departure from South Africa, asked in a front-page article whether the Swede had been “planted” in the country “for the purpose of stirring up trouble”. The journalist posed

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<sup>20</sup> “Swedish Writer Shuts Herself Up In Flat”, *The Natal Mercury* (Durban), 10 February 1961, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> “New Moves in Swede’s Arrest”, *The Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1961, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> “S.A. bitterly assailed in Scandinavia”, *The Star*, 11 February 1961, p. 3.

the hypothetical question: "Are certain business groups in Sweden, among them a newspaper syndicate, involved in a plot to create 'incidents' in South Africa to discredit the Union?" Smith asserted that unspecified "well-informed and influential" people in Johannesburg had told her that such a conspiracy "might exist" but did not explain what that ambiguous phrase meant. Lidman had responded to Smith's queries categorically, calling allegations that she had been planted "a cruel and cynical untruth". In the same interview, Lidman conceded that "the problems in South Africa are so deep I would not dare to try to interpret them after such a little while in this country". The following day at the airport, she reiterated this in a different mode, declaring that conditions in South Africa were "far worse" than she had believed before arriving in the country, partly because the comprehensive scope of apartheid legislation compelled people to violate the law.<sup>23</sup>

Before boarding the plane, Lidman insisted to reporters that she loved South Africa, was sorry to depart, and hoped to return. In a related and arguably misleading if sincere comment, she asserted that she was leaving the country of her own volition and that the South African authorities had not compelled her to quit the country. Lidman complained that reporters had "chased" her and that she sorely needed "peace and quiet". She disclosed that she had begun to write a book which she hoped to complete in Dar-es-Salaam but did not reveal its topic.<sup>24</sup> At the same impromptu news conference, Lidman also accused the South African press of irresponsibility and hypocrisy because journalists had focused their attention on her instead of covering adequately more pressing concerns that affected their own country. "There are extremely few victims of the Immorality Act", she reasoned, but "the victims of the pass laws are counted in the tens of thousands". Lidman told African reporters unambiguously that she would prefer to hear them "scream out to the world about the atrocities you know

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<sup>23</sup> "Is Swedish plot behind the Lidman affair?" *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 26 February 1961, pp. 1, 27.

<sup>24</sup> "Sara Lidman Sê Sy Is Lief vir S.A., Wil Terugkeer", *Die Burger*, 27 February 1961, p. 5.

occur here instead of making noise about this immorality case”. One replied sympathetically that while she was in a position to leave the country and speak out from abroad, they had to remain in South Africa.<sup>25</sup>

Lidman had vented her feelings at greater length to the press in Sweden during the ordeal. In an interview conducted by telephone and published on 10 February in *Dagens Nyheter*, she insisted that she had neither engaged in any political activities nor even discussed politics in South Africa. Lidman also remarked that she had been unable to study the Zulu language because of preoccupation with contemporary affairs in South Africa, but what the latter entailed she did not mention. In any event, Lidman professed to the Swedish press that if she had violated any South African law, she had done so in ignorance. Nevertheless, she predicted a protracted trial which would not reach its conclusion before her visa expired on 28 February. Lidman promised to write a lengthy defence speech if given the opportunity.<sup>26</sup>

Another Swedish journalist, Barbro Alving of *Vecko-Journalen*, succeeded in reaching Lidman by telephone at the latter’s flat in Johannesburg in mid-February. Lidman complained bitterly, though without giving details, about the tenacity of the South African press corps in besieging her temporary home. When asked about the condition of her health, she replied pithily that she did not know whether she had any left. The Swedish author did not savour the attention she was receiving in both the South African and foreign press. She was particularly insistent that her compatriots not regard her as a “martyr” and asserted that issues much greater than her own behaviour were at stake.<sup>27</sup>

Swedish editorial comment on the matter had predictably focused on apartheid and viewed Lidman as a victim of both manipulative legislation and an unjust social system. An editor at *Dagens Nyheter*

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “Stort försvarstal av Sara Lidman”, *Dagens Nyheter* (Stockholm), 10 February 1961, pp. 1, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Barbro Alving, “Gör mig inte till martyr”, *Vecko-Journalen*, LII, no. 7 (17 February 1961), p. 18.

used the opportunity to give publicity to a campaign to support financially the campaign against apartheid.<sup>28</sup> In Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning, meanwhile, an editor called attention to the private nature of the behavior which the Immorality Act forbade and warned that its enforcement fostered “ett motbjudande intrång i människors privatliv, för spioneri, angiveri och andra ökända former av polisförtryck”. To this Swedish journalist, the actual “immorality” was thus on the side of the “sydafrikanska polisstaten”.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after reaching Dar-es-Salaam, Lidman declined in an interview with United Press International to discuss details of her relationship with Nthite but declared that the novel she had begun to write would indeed reflect her own experiences in South Africa.<sup>30</sup> She subsequently wrote for Dagens Nyheter a lengthy commentary about her arrest and deportation from South Africa. Much of it was an explanation of her decision to accept expulsion rather than remaining in Johannesburg and, after pleading not guilty, delivering a ringing defence speech as she earlier had vowed to do. Her Swedish critics, she explained, unwittingly paraded ignorance of South African jurisprudence. Lidman explained that if her case had gone to court, she would not have had a chance to give a speech. The police would have read their report, and she would have been required to respond to a series of “absurd” questions before hearing the verdict. She added that there would not have been an opportunity to debate whether the Immorality Act was a just statute, as some Swedes had expected her to do. Even if Lidman had been given permission to speak at length, it would have been an exercise in futility, she believed, alleging that legislative authorities in South Africa were “indifferent to international standards of justice”.<sup>31</sup>

In this apologia Lidman also commented disparagingly on the South African press. She vented her irritation at reporters’ obtrusive methods

<sup>28</sup> “Sara Lidmans ‘brott’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 February 1961, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> “På de anklagades bänk”, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, 13 February 1961, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> “Vill vittna om orätten i Afrikabok”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 February 1961, pp. 1, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Lidman, “Efterskrift”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 19 March 1961, p. 4.

of attempting to extract information from her and misquoting her in print. Lidman declared that they had attributed false quotations to her and slipped provocative written statements under the door of the flat where she had stayed. Furthermore, one journalist had insisted that she open the door because he supposedly wished to deliver a message from her “African friend”. Lidman admitted that she had considered telephoning the police and having her tormenters forcibly removed but could not stomach the thought of subjecting them to the “derisive sadists” who had entered her flat and arrested her and Nthite. She had also contemplated taking legal action against one of the newspapers whose staff had fabricated a story about her, but her indictment and de facto lack of freedom of movement had prevented her from doing so.<sup>32</sup> To what libellous bit of journalism she was referring is not apparent.

It seems highly plausible that this traumatic event and the truncating of her stay in South Africa not only altered the schedule of Lidman’s writing by stimulating her to write a novel before she had planned to but also shaped that book and indirectly helped to change the course of her literary career. As Helena Forsås-Scott has pointed out, Lidman’s experience in Africa “became a watershed in her development”.<sup>33</sup> That this author subsequently became an internationally known social and political crusader, especially through her opposition to American military intervention in south-east Asia, is too well established to require documentation here. The attention which literary scholars in Sweden and elsewhere gave Lidman’s widely publicized activities on the stage of international politics during the 1960s and her temporary shift away from fiction to documentary literature, however, have militated against adequate consideration of *Jag och min son*, making that novel a relatively neglected work, despite its generally positive reception in Sweden. In the remainder of the present article I shall endeavor to fill part of this lacuna in Swedish literary history by exploring the rôle of interracial sexual relations in the first version of this novel, especially as

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Helena Forsås-Scott, “In Defense of People and Forests: Sara Lidman’s Recent Novels”, *World Literature Today*, LVIII, no. 1 (Winter 1984), p. 5.

a reflection of Lidman's experience in South Africa, and use this theme as a key to understanding the wider implications of the book and its significance as a new departure in Lidman's authorship.<sup>34</sup>

It should be emphasized that *Jag och min son* is not simply a protest against South African legislation barring interracial sexual relations, even though the main character and first-person narrator, an unnamed and morally repulsive Swedish man living temporarily in Johannesburg, has a brief tryst with a Zulu woman and the South African police learn of their affair. This novel is a much more widely gauged attack on racial discrimination in South Africa and, no less, on white indifference to its far-reaching implications. Indeed, moral nihilism, not discriminatory legislation as such, is the target in Lidman's literary archery. She shoots several thematic arrows at both, however, none more accurately than the one drawn from the quiver of her own encounter with the "special branch" of the South African police whose duty it was to probe reported violations of the Immorality Act and arrest the people involved. Sexual relations are the cutting edge in and most acute form of interracial associations and can have many different kinds of ramifications. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lidman marshalled part of her own experience in this regard as one focal point in this novel.

The plot of *Jag och min son* is more economical than those of Lidman's previous novels and allows her to concentrate more vividly on her main themes in a setting more exotic than those of her regional fictional works. The narrator, a Swede in his forties whose European experiences include growing up in a dysfunctional family in which he apparently suffered sexual abuse at the hands of his resented father, fighting for Franco in Spain and for Finnish sovereignty in the Winter War of 1939-1940, uncompleted medical studies in Uppsala, and an unhappy marriage, takes his young son to South Africa, where he hopes

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<sup>34</sup> Lidman completed a revised version of *Jag och min son* in 1963, not long after returning to Sweden from Africa. The changes in the text are significant in various respects, but the theme of interracial sex remains a motif powerfully reminiscent of her encounter with the Immorality Act.

to earn enough money quickly to return to Sweden and rehabilitate himself by purchasing a farm. His reason for being in South Africa thus reflects general European exploitation of the continent. Yet in developing and gradually revealing this unnamed narrator, Lidman has arguably created a caricature of much of what she found repulsive about European attitudes towards and abuse of Africa and its peoples. Within the first few brief chapters, he unwittingly discloses that despite his oft-repeated self-assurances that he lives almost exclusively for the welfare of his young son, he is a thoroughly egotistical and unscrupulous character whose egotism is all-consuming and ultimately self-destructive. Failing to make either friends or the small fortune on which he has counted, he moves from one weakly remunerative job to another, squandering his limited funds on gambling and other steps of a downward spiral of debauchery. All the while he suffers from a variety of social claustrophobia, living in increasing fear of falling into the despised category of “poor whites” and consequently never being able to liberate himself from the country which he despises.

His relations with black Africans are uniformly superficial and generally condescending. While quietly reaping moderate benefits from the racist structure of South African society, he repeatedly absolves himself of responsibility for what he realizes is the exploitation of its black majority through various forms of banal rationalization. This becomes a Leitmotiv in the novel. The narrator insists that he cares not a whit what other whites think of the indigenes because “jag har inte kommit til Syd-Afrika för att lägga mig i landets domestikaffärer” (p. 82). He is quite unconcerned about the vulnerability of black labour: “Är det mitt fel att infödingarana inte får ha fackföreningar och att deras löner är så låga? En mer eller mindre i detta hav av orättvisa spelar väl ingen roll” (pp. 30-31). Furthermore, he evades responsibility by declaring, “Det här är inte mitt land. Jag har inte varit med om att stifta dess lagar” and asserts that it is the responsibility of the oppressed blacks, whom he knows are politically impotent, to cast off the shackles of institutionalized racism (pp. 57-58). The narrator believes that he has “inga särskilda rasfördomar” (p. 178), but in nearly every chapter he betrays prejudices that underscore how thoroughly he has conformed to



those common to the white South African personae, even to the point of referring to the blacks as “kannibaler” (p. 170). Indeed, far from maintaining political neutrality, he explicitly contends that apartheid is necessary to prevent blacks from flooding central Johannesburg (p. 35) and to obviate a bloody massacre of the civilized people like himself by the ostensibly wild Africans (p. 41).

Early on the narrator meets and persistently attempts without success to befriend a young lady from Scotland, Kathleen Snow, who has come to Johannesburg in search of her mother, Kitty, who gave birth to her out of wedlock and whom she has not seen since infancy. In a marginally plausible episode, the narrator has discovered the identity of the mother, however, a dishevelled and prematurely aged “poor white” who has thrown in her lot with urban blacks to whom she illegally sells liquor. He also discovers that Kathleen Snow’s father, a wealthy Scottish immigrant businessman, has died and bequeathed his estate to a legitimate son. The narrator seeks to exploit this enmeshed and potentially embarrassing relationship through extortion. In the meantime, Kathleen has developed an apparently romantic friendship with a Zulu acquaintance of her mother who quotes Shakespeare in conversations the narrator overhears in the back of the dry cleaning shop which serves as a front for illicit liquor traffic. The narrator, in acute financial need, seeks to exploit this relationship as well as the illegality of the business in which Kathleen’s mother is engaged by offering to serve as a paid police informant. He enjoys only the slightest success in this desperate endeavour, however, and, feeling the constrictions of South African society closing in on him, flees the country as the novel ends.

The first of three general episodes involving actual and potential violations of the Immorality Act occurs in the third chapter. The narrator, who briefly employs an insouciant Zulu maid and nannie named Gladness at his flat in Johannesburg, has intercourse with her one evening but shortly thereafter regrets the episode and dismisses her. True to his scapegoating form, he explains that he should not have copulated with her because “hon är inte min typ, hon är för mycket gamle syster” and blames this vulnerable woman for the incident: “Men

hon fångade mig med ett litet uttryck som i all sin enkelhet förbryllade mig” (p. 26). This brief encounter is then forgotten for approximately 100 pages, when it surprisingly resurfaces.

This occurs midway through *Jag och min son* when the narrator engages in his longest and most detailed conversation, though one which discloses virtually nothing about himself. His partner in this dialogue is identified merely as “Jack”, a neighbour who he realizes has much in common with himself and with whom he is thus able to drink and to converse more cordially than anyone else in the novel, including his own son. Jack is a South African policeman in the “special branch”; his tawdry work consists of pursuing suspected violators of the Immorality Act. In painting Jack and developing his part in this conversation, Lidman draws heavily on her experience, and the result is a correspondingly loathsome portrayal of the man and his trade. Even more explicitly than the narrator, Jack embodies many of the attributes which Lidman had identified as roots of human suffering in her previous novels as well as in earlier chapters of *Jag och min son* and would subsequently continue to lambast in both fictional and non-fictional works. Like the narrator, he fought for the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. Jack resents foreign criticism of South Africa’s racial policies and blames it for his country’s social strife. Moreover, he favours the proliferation of atomic weapons to South Africa where, he imagines, brandishing them will gain international respect. Jack can command blacks with sufficient authority and condescension to arouse the envy of the narrator, who notes that “när han beställer gör han det med så mycket säkrare arrogans än jag, som om han talade till en hårt dresserad hund man inte längre behöver visa piskan” (p. 118). He is chauvinistically self-righteous, declaring, “Vi har alltid varit istånd att göra vadsomhelst för att bevisa att vi har rätt” and proclaiming that South African whites are “samtidens martyrer” because they supposedly fight for western civilization against the ravages of the unholy trinity of “kannibalism, kommunism och barbari” (pp. 124-125). Jack also defends human bondage, ostensibly on the grounds that “när Grekland stod som högst i kulturellt avseende hade man slavar” and Plato assumed in his Republic that the institution would continue (p. 124). He

feels no compunction about maintaining instruments of misery provided they assist him in the fulfilment of his own task. Both purveyors of illegal alcohol which causes people to lose their sight and gangsters in the black locations should be tolerated, he insists, because they are valuable informers who give him and his colleagues tips about incidents of interracial sex. Like the narrator, Jack washes his hands of any notion of moral responsibility. Without being asked about possible ethical dilemmas in his work, he explains that he did not write the Immorality Act; his duty is merely to find those who violate it. In a passage apparently reflecting Lidman's humiliating experience in custody, Jack further rationalizes his task by broaching his lack of formal education and asserting that he follows the lead of people better schooled than himself, including forensic physicians who investigate alleged violations of this law. "... en sån inte skäms för att dra på sig gummihandskar och tvångsundersöka flickorna, varför skulle jag sätta mig på mina höga hästar och tycka att det är nedrigt?" (p. 131) Moreover, a decade and a half after the Nürnberg trials, Jack resorts to a conventional argument that he is a mere subordinate in a hierarchy and declares categorically that he "kan utföra vilken order som helst som Syd-Afrikas regering kan ge mig" (p. 132). On his axiological scale black African lives occupy a low rung. In a rare instance of moral questioning, the narrator mentions that recently a white South African farmer was sentenced to a year in prison for killing a black person and asks him why the punishment for violating the Immorality Act should be more severe than that. "Det större brottet förtjänar det strängare straffet", Jack replies hatefully and without apparent reflection (p. 126).

The conversation between the narrator and this guardian of racist sexual mores is not merely an apparent cathartic for Lidman, but also a didactic and defensive tool. *Jag och min son* is in several respects a transitional work between her early novels set in northern Sweden and her political nonfiction of the later 1960s and the 1970s. Lidman's discussion of the enforcement of the Immorality Act (and, in some cases, the willingness of the police to tolerate violations of it) falls into this category. What precautions, if any, she and Nthite took to avoid detection is unknown, but to her the "special branch" must have

seemed virtually omniscient in its awareness of violations of that statute. Jack casually informs the narrator that he knows about his tryst with Gladness but assures him that he mentions the case “bara för att visa dis att det praktiskt taget inte existerar ett svartvitt förhållande som polisen inte känner till” (p. 128). Through this detective’s account, Lidman informs readers that it is not uncommon for the police to listen to the telephone conversations of suspects. Neighbours, moreover, were sources of information; black informants received £5 for their services in this regard (pp. 128-130).

Neither equality before the law nor police integrity characterizes enforcement of the Immorality Act in Lidman’s presentation of it. She relates not only how Jack has declined to place his Swedish chum into legal difficulties but also lets the former tell about an incident in which a partner on the police force had offered not to arrest an interracial couple if the apprehended African woman agreed to dispense sexual favours (p. 127).

In what might be the most transparently defensive passage in *Jag och min son*, Lidman emphasizes that not all arrests for alleged violations of the Immorality Act involve sexual intercourse. Jack explains to the narrator that sometimes inexperienced couples believe they have nothing to fear if they are not caught *flagrante delicto* performing sexual acts. In these instances, the police intervene and, in Jack’s words, “tar dom från deras rosor och ljus och låter dom svalka sig i finkan” (p. 129). Such people, he explains, can be charged with “conspiracy to commit or attempt to commit an indecent or immoral act”. Jack further indicates that “en man och en kvinna av olika ras som befinner sig ensamme i ett rum eller en bil efter klockan tio på kvällen kan enligt lagen alltid åtalas för att vilja gå isäng” (p. 129). This didactic element inserted at this stage of the dialogue is especially intriguing because in none of the Swedish, South African, or British journalistic accounts of Lidman’s arrest was it definitely stated that she and Nthite had been apprehended while having intercourse. Lidman, it seems, chooses to leave her thinly veiled *apologia ambigua*.

This ambiguity leads to the third segment of *Jag och min son* involving interracial sexual relationships, namely that between the

Scotswoman Kathleen Snow and her Zulu friend Samuel. Their bond is almost the diametrical opposite of the narrator's relationship with Gladness, and the differences entail much more than the racial identities of the respective males and females. Kathleen and Samuel have a stable relationship on equal terms, one involving mutual interests in *inter alia* literature. Instead of the police tapping their telephone conversations, Kathleen's impoverished mother overhears their discussion and nods approvingly while the linguistically limited narrator is unable to comprehend a word. Lidman describes their relationship as altogether innocent. This may have particular personal significance because in places, such as in her conversation with her conservative half-brother about race relations in South Africa, Kathleen serves as Lidman's spokesperson without, however, performing an autobiographical function.

The increasingly desperate narrator, desiring more intensely to flee South Africa and needing money to do so, elects to exploit this innocuous relationship. Turned out of his flat for failing to pay the rent, he visits Jack and requests £5 for informing him about Kathleen and Samuel. Jack dismisses this on the grounds that seven other informants had already told him about this interracial couple. The narrator then claims that he can give the location of Kitty's shebeen, but Jack is even better informed about that establishment and rejects this plea for funds, as well. Better to let the Africans drink themselves into a subdued state, he reasons. Only when the narrator claims that Kitty is distributing political propaganda do Jack's ears perk up and he agrees that the Swede deserves the requested £5. As a parting rhetorical shot at the Immorality Act entailing a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, Lidman has this would-be enforcer of that statute describe to his Swedish friend a case he had encountered the night before in which he and a colleague had been compelled to release "en flicka från Skandinavien och en kaffer" because the female in question had claimed to be a Sami and therefore of Asiatic as opposed to European origin (p. 211).

Significant to the subsequent course of Lidman's authorship, late in the novel Kathleen, who more than the narrator has succeeded in coming into contact with the indigenous population of South Africa,

engages in a detailed debate with her half-brother about racial oppression and exploitation there. Very little in their detailed verbal exchange rises above the level of conventional arguments for and against apartheid, and even if it lay within the parameters of the present article there would be no need to address their conversation as such here. Part of its importance to literary history is that despite its banality it begins to lead Lidman away from fiction and into the realm of explicitly political nonfiction, for which she would become internationally known during the 1960s, notwithstanding the appearance in 1964 of her other African novel, *Med fem diamanter*. *Jag och min son* also incorporated experimental artistic dimensions in Lidman's writing which went well beyond a major change of geographic scope, though that in itself was pivotal and eased the transition to other thematic concerns. For the first time she employs a first-person narrative technique which is largely a confessional monologue. Unlike Lidman's earlier novels, moreover, *Jag och min son* is structurally a rapidly changing montage of scenes with frequent flashbacks whose significance is not always apparent.

This portrayal of moral indifference and interracial sexual relations in South Africa was also a noteworthy departure in the broader context of Swedish literary history. By probing deeply into the minds of some of her characters in *Jag och min son*, Lidman went beyond what most other Swedes who had written novels and lengthy nonfictional works about Africa had depicted. In the mid-1980s Raoul Granqvist explored "Den litterära bilden av Afrika i Sverige under femtio- og sextioalet: Artur Lundkvists och Per Wästbergs perspektiv" and concluded that prior to the appearance of the latter's *På svarta listan* in 1960 Swedish authors had rarely gone beyond conventional, condescending stereotypes of Africans as primitive, sexually unrestrained people.<sup>35</sup> This assertion arguably fails to do justice to Gunnar Helander's novels about South Africa which, however, also embody racial stereotyping, as I have

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<sup>35</sup> Granqvist, "Den litterära bilden af Afrika i Sverige under femtio- och sextioalet", pp. 20-36.

analyzed elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Had Granqvist extended the chronological framework of his study to include the early 1960s, he undoubtedly would have noted a fundamental shift of perspective, one in which Lidman helped to shape a much different literary image of Africa than that which previously had prevailed.

In the international arena of literary criticism, Jag och min son contradicts prevailing theories of racial stereotypes in colonial discourse more than it corroborates them. A thoroughgoing analysis of this battlefield of literary scholarship necessarily lies outside the bounds of the present article. We shall here refer only to those of two of the principal combatants who have shaped the current debate. Proceeding from deconstructionist premises, Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes what he perceives as a fundamental and universal contradiction in colonial discourse. On the one hand, he identified the underlying “concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” as “the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference” in colonial literature. Paradoxically, the fixity on which authors rely “connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition”. This attitudes becomes manifested in stereotypes, which Bhabha regards as the “major discursive strategy” of the literature in question. The stereotypes, though themselves often recurrent, are part of an ambivalence characteristic of colonialist discourse overall. Bhabha notes that stereotypes refer to things which are widely postulated as unchallenged truth but nevertheless “must be anxiously repeated”. He illustrates this by referring to two conventional images. It is “as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proven”. The stereotypes themselves, Bhabha believes, stress the “otherness” of the colonial peoples to whom they refer. This essential difference is a product of “the fantasy of origin and identity”; its genesis is best

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<sup>36</sup> Helander’s unconscious racial stereotyping in his novel of 1955, *Storstadsneger*, despite his explicit pleas there against such discourse, is discussed in Frederick Hale, “Urban Apartheid and Racial Stereotypes in Gunnar Helander’s *Storstadsneger*”, *Scandinavian Studies*, LXVI, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 68-91.

explained in mythical and psychological categories, not social and economic ones. In this kind of literature nature, not nurture, determines the lines of cultural demarcation.<sup>37</sup> The function of the stereotypes is essentially one of legitimizing exploitation. Colonial peoples are usually depicted as both “degenerate” and “abnormal”; by implication, their condition justifies the intervention of European or other peoples to restore through education, evangelization, the imposition of their own economic system, or other means a state of normality. At the same time, the stereotypes underscore the differences between colonizers and indigenous peoples in order to prevent the absorption of the former in the cultures which they are exploiting.<sup>38</sup>

One of Bhabha’s chief adversaries is Abdul Raheman JanMohamed, a Kenyan literary scholar at the University of California in Berkeley who pursues more conventional historical criticism from a quasi-Marxist viewpoint. In contrast to Bhabha, he seeks to understand the influence of economic, political, and other external determinants on colonial discourse in its imperialist context and its function in legitimizing European hegemony. One of JanMohamed’s fundamental conceptual tools in analyzing colonial literature is the notion of “Manichean dualism” which he has adapted from the works of Frantz Fanon. He believes that “we can better understand colonialist discourse [...] through an analysis that maps its ideological function in relation to actual imperialist practices”. Going to the heart of the matter, when one takes this approach, one supposedly discovers that “any evident ‘ambivalence’ is in fact a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the manichean allegory”. This essential dualism, JanMohamed argues, “is based on the transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference”. In other words, authors of colonial literature take obvious ethnic differences to

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<sup>37</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism”, in Francis Barker, *et al.* (eds.), *Literature, Politics and Theory. Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-1984* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. 148-149.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-156.



their extreme poles and create stereotypes which offer diametrically opposed ethical contrasts, with the Europeans almost invariably representing good and the Africans, Asians, or other colonized peoples embodying evil. JanMohamed laments that so deeply entrenched are the traditional racist attitudes lurking behind the scenes that “even the works of some of the most enlightened critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organization based on racial/metaphysical oppositions, whose motives remain morally fixed but whose categories flex to accommodate any situation”.<sup>39</sup>

Many specialists in Scandinavian literature have apparently paid scant attention to these and related theories, notwithstanding the well-publicized controversies they have sparked in Anglophone literary critical circles. Does *Jag och min son* fit either Bhabha’s or JanMohamed’s depiction of colonial literature or the shape and function of racial stereotyping in it? For the most part, this novel runs counter to both theories. Lidman evinces no interest in the preservation of white hegemony in South Africa, which in fact she chastised both before and after the publication of *Jag och min son*. Its personae encompass both individuals who embody her axiological framework and others whom she clearly depicts as amoral and thus immoral. The latter are chiefly whites and include both South African nationals and aliens. Few of the characters are indigenous black Africans, but they fare much better than most of the Europeans under Lidman’s critical pen. Also at odds with prevailing theories is her understanding of the place of acculturation in the phenomenon of “otherness”. The anonymous narrator takes on some of the values of white South Africa, while his young son becomes bonded to Gladness and, through her, to Africa. In the closing scene as these two Swedes are racing away from South Africa, the boy cries out to her in Zulu “Ngifunukuya kuThokozile, uThokozile ngumama, ngiyamthand’ uThokozile, ngifunukuya kuThokozile”, words which Lidman leaves untranslated to underscore his alienation from Swedish

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<sup>39</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature”, *Critical Quarterly*, XII, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 59-61.

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The extent to which Nordic fiction either undergirds or undermines such theories as those which Bhabha and JanMohamed have put forward remains to be ascertained and presents a potentially rich lode to be mined. That Scandinavia has exercised little direct political hegemony over peoples in, for example, Africa and Asia suggests that its *littérateurs* had different points of reference than did their British counterparts. That fact in itself, however, by no means implies a priori that Scandinavian authors, including those with direct experience in the colonies of other European countries, somehow remained immune to the racial prejudices which ran strong in the colonial mind. The works of such writers as Gunnar Helander and Artur Lundkvist amply demonstrate that fact. In the case of Sara Lidman, however, one finds part of a major shift of perception which both literary scholars and historians would do well to consider.