The Bear as *Ursus Sacer* in 19th Century Swedish Literature

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When the new Swedish national hunting statute was passed in 1864 it was decided to intensify the extermination of all the large predators such as bear, wolf, wolverine and lynx. The bounty was increased tenfold, and the policy was a success: by the end of the 19th century the bear was on the verge of extinction, and the price of a bearskin had skyrocketed. In the winter of 1904, the nobleman and hunter Eric von Rosen proudly let himself be photographed outside his home at a fashionable address in central Stockholm, with eight dead bears he had killed. (Finnish bears since the Swedish ones were scarce.)

Photo: Axel Malmström Dagens Nyheter March 13, 1904.¹

¹ The picture was taken by *Dagens Nyheter’s* (DN:s) young photographer Axel Malmström, but it seems as if it was not published at the time, but DN writes about von Rosen’s hunt and the bears outside his house on March 13, 1904. The picture was published in DN in an article on Malmström, May 14, 1928.
What seemed like an achievement in the nineteenth century would by the dawn of the new century take on different connotations. When the possibility of the bear’s extinction became a reality, public critique emerged against the state’s bounty on bears and its devastating effects. Already in 1905, the Swedish Royal Academy of Science argued that the bear had to be protected, since so few bears were left that reproduction was no longer taking place.\(^2\) In a law on national parks from 1909, it was forbidden to hunt bears, and in 1916 the king Gustaf V issued a ban on the cruel tradition of bear-dancing.\(^3\) When the Nordic outdoor museum Skansen, created by Arthur Hazelius in 1891, decided to house animals, bears were among the first animals to be introduced at Skansen. This took place already in 1893.\(^4\) In a couple of years, the bear went from monster, with a bounty on its head, to a literary artefact and protected museum piece.

In the Nordic countries, the bear can, like no other wild animal, be traced in ancient folklore, folk tales, mythic imaginations of shapeshifting, place names and linguistic expressions. Bears are found in a variety of heraldic weapons for both nobility and cities and regions. On the verge of extinction, the bear seems to have spurred the cultural imagination in new ways. In *fin de siècle* Swedish literature, the bear appears in several stories that also criticize or ridicule bear hunting.\(^5\) This literary intervention on the bear’s behalf could be seen as yet another answer to Georg Brandes’ famous aesthetic and ethical call for literature that

\(^3\) Pelin Tünaydin, “Pawing through the history of bear dancing,” *Frühneuzeit-Info* 24 (oct. 2013), 53.
\(^4\) The idea behind Skansen, once created by Artur Hazelius as a microcosm of Sweden, is an open-air museum that collects and preserves the material memory of a nation in one place, not only buildings but also its animals and traditions. See also Claudia Lindén & Hans Ruin, “A Home to Die in: Hazelius, Skansen and the Aesthetics of Historical Disappearance,” in *History Unfolds: samtidskonst möter historia: Contemporary Art Meets History* (Stockholm: Historiska, 2017).
\(^5\) Helena Nyblom and Alfild Agrell also wrote short stories in which the bear plays a central role, but there the bear is still more alien than in Lagerlöf’s and Molin’s stories. Editors’ note: Concerning bear-stories see also Ann-Sofie Lönngren’s chapter in this volume.
debates contemporary problems. In *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* Philip Armstrong has pointed out that how animals are understood and treated by humans should be considered in relation to the ways we feel about them: “Literary texts testify to the shared emotions, moods and thoughts of people in specific historical moments and places, as they are influenced by—and as they influence—the surrounding socio-cultural forces and systems.” In this article, I will show, in two short stories from the 1890s by the Swedish authors Selma Lagerlöf and Pelle Molin, how the ethical and emotional similarities between man and bear are accentuated. Thereby a cultural, religious, and political space opens up, where bear and human beings co-exist. In line with Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, I will also argue that the bear can be understood as *Ursus sacer*, as bare life, pointing towards the always-already crossed line between humans and non-human animals, nature and culture, that according to Agamben is the *urphänomen* of politics.

**Bears—between the human and the divine**

Its precarious position makes the bear an *Ursus sacer*, to paraphrase the Italian philosopher Agamben’s concept *homo sacer*: an ancient roman law specifying a person that may be killed but not sacrificed, someone outside both human and divine law. Agamben interprets the “sacer” category not as a taboo—as it has often been interpreted—but as an “originary political structure that is located in a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and juridical.” The person who can be killed but not sacrificed constitutes a kind of double exception, excluded both from human law and at the same time from the divine law, but also—through this double ban—the

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homo sacer is included in both categories, the human and the divine.

This zone in between is what Agamben calls “bare life,” that which comes prior to the juridical law. Bare life not only comes before the law, but is consubstantial with the law, and with this double ban from the profane and the religious. Agamben regards bare life as the originary activity of sovereignty. The sacredness of life, which today is invoked as a fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, originally expresses both “life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment,” Agamben writes.8

The bear’s close resemblance to man, in real life (being omnivorous and a pedimeter, an animal putting its heel first when walking on two legs) as well as the bear’s central position in folklore, culture, literature, in pre- or rather non-Christian belief, as well as in the Christian tradition, turns it into a creature that could be viewed as another example of “bare life” in Agamben’s sense of a double exception/inclusion in the profane and the religious. As an actual animal the bear is affected by human actions and politics but, concomitantly, it also affects the cultural imagination and, by extension, humans. Agamben connects homo sacer with the Germanic and Scandinavian notion of “den fredlöse,” the outlaw, what in German is called friedlos or Friedlosigkeit: “founded on the concept of peace (Friede) and the corresponding exclusion from the community of the wrong-doer, who therefore became friedlos, without peace, and whom anyone was permitted to kill without committing homicide.”9 For Agamben this also connects to the old islandic expression vargr y veum for someone who had committed a crime, especially in a church, or a murder: “In the bandit and the outlaw (wargus, vargr, the wolf and, in the religious sense, the sacred

8 Agamben, 53.

9 Agamben, 63.
wolf, *vargr y veum*), Germanic and Scandinavian antiquity give us a brother of *homo sacer* beyond the shadow of any doubt.”

This connection between *homo sacer* and the old Nordic concept of *fredlöshet*, which also has a connotation of animality, of a mix between the human and the animal, opens up for us to see how the bear can be understood as an *Ursus sacer*. When the bear has been made *fredlös*, an outlaw, the old resemblance between the human and bear becomes like a weird, distorted, Dorian Grey-like, mirror of the human.

The Christian tradition has a long complex history with animals, especially bears, and is connected to both older bear cults and the close resemblance between bear and human. In his book *The Bear, History of a Fallen King* from 2011, the French historian Michel Pastoureau traces the millennium-long process of the Church’s struggle against the bear: “Almost everywhere, from the Alps to the Baltic, the bear stood as a rival to Christ. The Church thought it appropriate to declare war on the bear, to fight him by all means possible, and to bring him down from his throne and his altars.”

According to Pastoreau, the Church’s struggle against the bear took several forms: demonization as well as the replacement of sacred rituals with Saint days or other Church festivities. Around the year 1000 the bear was replaced with the lion, a more Christological symbol in the eastern tradition. But the definite dethroning of the bear comes with the

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10 Agamben, 63. I am grateful to Olof Sundqvist for pointing out that this expression is attested in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar by Oddr: gerir Hakon j. utlagðan oc scylldi hann heita vargr i veum. er hann hafði brotít hit ozta hof i Gautlandi. A person who killed someone on a sanctified ground could be described as a “wolf” in ancient Scandinavia: “In *Egils saga* 49, Queen Gunnhildr’s brother, Eyvindr, was considered a ‘wolf’ after killing at a vé sanctuary: ‘Because Eyvindr had committed murder at a sacred place he was declared a defiler [actually a wolf (*vargr*)] and had to go into outlawry at once’”, Olof Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers: Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 294.


12 Pastoureau, 167.
bestiary Roman de Renart in the mid-13th century, where the bear is ridiculed when portrayed as a coward and a glutton, who only thinks of honey.

At the same time, in the Middle Ages, the humiliating tradition of bear-dancing commences. Bear-dancing, with bears in chains and muzzle, were common in the whole of Europe up until the early twentieth century and can be seen as a tradition and late example of humiliating the bear. Being the only four-legged animal that, like humans, also is a plantigrade, the dancing bear becomes uncannily like a human in chains when moving on two legs. Pastoureau points out that the church, which condemned spectacles, tolerated this practice with bears, but looked down on the bear handlers, something that in turn made the bear an even more despised animal: “Associating the bear with them therefore effectively helped to devalue the animal and, therefore through a kind of osmosis, to project onto him all the vices imputed to his masters and companions in misfortunes.”

Quakers and animal rights

The same Christian tradition that once subdued the worship of the sacred bear is also behind the emerging animal rights movement, which began in Victorian England. The Quakers were active in the anti-vivisection movement and Quaker Joseph Pease persuaded parliament to insert two clauses in the act to protect animals. These clauses primarily concerned domestic animals, and perhaps, therefore, could run parallel to the long tradition within the Church, from St Augustine, of placing animals both domestic and wild, beneath humans. The Christian tradition is complex however, and, as Rod Preece and David Fraser have pointed out, there are plenty of examples in

13 Tünaydin, 52.
14 Pastoureau, 172–175.
16 St. Augustine has a special disregard for the bear, which he calls the devil: “ursus est diabolical.” Quoted from Pastoureau, 120.
the Bible and in philosophy of how a different position is adopted, to wit all creatures are regarded as God’s creatures. How these beliefs can be interpreted and translated into action has of course been the subject of recurring debates, which in turn have been “influenced by economic forces, ecclesiastical institutions, sheer individual and collective self-interest, as well as by honest, legitimate, and well-considered differences of interpretation”, as Preece and Fraser write.17

When the discussion of stopping cruelty against animals starts in Victorian England it is firmly grounded in Quaker and Christian beliefs about man’s relation to his neighbor and kin. When the first ‘Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ was founded in England in 1824, it was initiated as a response to the bad treatment of urban workhorses and stray dogs. Anna Sewell, who came from a British quaker family, wrote Black Beauty (1877) as a critique of the treatment of workhorses.18 It became one of the world’s all-time best-selling novels, and a famous argument for the welfare of horses. The novel is written from the perspective of Black Beauty, a horse that starts his life under good circumstances and then by unfortunate events goes through several owners, both poor and cruel, but in a happy ending finds his way back to a good life with kind humans. Sewell connects her animal rights argument to human rights. When a local boy gets into trouble for abusing a horse, Black Beauty overhears one stable hand telling another that it “served him right…he used to swagger about and bully the little boys.”19

Caroline Hagood points out that in this way “Sewell bridges the human-animal rights gap by implying that cruelty to animals often extends to humans.”20

18 Editors’ note: Concerning Black Beauty see also Karin Dirke’s and Sune Borkfels’s chapter in this volume.
Darwinism’s influence on the bear in literature

It is not possible to discuss the relationship between human and non-human animals in the latter part of the nineteenth century without taking into account Darwin’s tremendous influence, principally here the conclusion he reaches in *Descent of man*: “the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.”

Although Darwinism was on one level the most radical philosophical challenge to anthropocentrism, the registering of these implications was not immediate. Instead, the notion of evolutionary development, from the primitive to the higher, could be used to argue for a difference between animals and humans and between peoples. Although man was an animal, he was the highest animal, and the evolutionary doctrine could be used again to secure man’s supremacy. Yet, animal studies researcher Carrie Rohan proposes that “[w]hat the literature of the late Victorian and modernist era reveals, however, is the lurking anxiety that this view of human privilege cannot be maintained.”

Pelle Molin’s short story “A ring-dance while mother is waiting…” (“En ringdans medan mor väntar …” (1897)) draws an analogy between bear and man as parents defending their

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*Kenyon Review*, April 24 (2019). The association between animal-rights and social radicalism was more complicated in the US, where the Quakers were notably important in the abolitionist movement. In the US around the turn of the twentieth century, various discourses on animality could also be used with racist implications. As Michael Lundblad has shown, white people could claim their humanity through their care for animals, in relation to blacks who were then presented as more ‘savage’, wild and inhuman. See Michael Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in the Progressive-era U.S. Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.


children.\textsuperscript{23} Lagerlöf also proceeds analogically in “The Peace of God,” (“Gudsfreden” (1899)) through a reference to the biblical narrative about the good Samaritan and the medieval convention of \textit{Pax et treuga Dei}. Even though neither Lagerlöf nor Molin mention the animal-rights movement emerging in their own time, they seem to incorporate such a perspective in their writings. A few years later, Lagerlöf would openly comment on the bear’s possible extinction in her famous book \textit{The Wonderful Adventures of Nils} (1906). More specifically, for our present purposes, what is central here is that Molin and Lagerlöf create new ways of perceiving the bear.\textsuperscript{24} In their short stories, the bear becomes someone who resembles the human, man’s neighbor; bear and human are once more connected, rekindling their long mutual history.

\textbf{Pelle Molin’s “A ring-dance while mother is waiting…”}

Pelle Molin (1864–1896) was an artist and a writer from Ångermanland on the northeast coast of Sweden. A journalist and writer of short stories, Molin died young, at the age of 32. All his stories are about the lives of small peasants or Sami in northern Sweden. His stories did not have the same religious undercurrent as Selma Lagerlöf’s, though his way of depicting the relationship between humans and non-human animals shows an unusual sensitivity to animals’ agency and emotional life. His short story, “A ring-dance while mother is waiting…” (1897) could be read as an example of the lurking anxiety that Rohan mentions; there is no real difference between man and


\textsuperscript{24} Lagerlöf seems to have had an interest in animal rights. She criticized Hazelius for keeping wild animals in captivity at Skansen. In ch. 38 of \textit{The Wonderful Adventures of Nils}, Nils liberates the eagle Gorgo, and then rides on Gorgo’s back when they escape together from Skansen.
bear, and the bear becomes a representation of ‘bare life’ in Agamben’s sense.

It is a very dramatic and sad story about a man called Salmon. While running through the woods on a bright summer’s night on his way to fetch the midwife, Salmon encounters a bear and becomes involved in a life-or-death struggle with the animal. Salmon’s wife is about to give birth to their fourth child. He has two hours to make the roundtrip from his wife through the forest to the midwife, and in the meantime is full of anxiety that something will happen to the child, or even worse, to his wife, making their three children motherless. The outcome depends on him, how fast he can run. Then he hears a noise and understands that it is a bear. He has met and shot many bears, but never has he seen one so angry.

But never before this night of suffering and distress and urgency had he seen the like of it. He could not explain this unimaginable rage ... and this stubborn running rascal, perhaps he was hunted and wounded, had he been robbed of his kids? No, there was not a single drop of blood in the brown hairs.25

Salmon hopes that the bear will lose interest in the hunt and leave. When this is not the case, he spots a tree to hide behind. He knows that if he is fast, he can keep the pine tree between himself and the bear at all times, thus avoiding the bear’s attacks.

A jump in half circle and Nalle rushed past, barely half a yard away. The lascivious leap ended with a sudden stop in the moss, where the nose plowed a little way. A noisy roar ... the moss was torn up when the bear quickly turned around ... it stood like a cloud ... and then he came again in blind anger ... hurriedly stopped by the tree, when he saw Salmon bend away

25 All translations into English from the original Swedish of Molin’s and Lagerlöf’s texts are made by the author.

“Men aldrig förr än denna lidandets och nödens och brådskans natt hade han sett maken till denna. Han kunde icke förklara detta ofattliga raseri ... och denna envisa löpande kanalje, var han kanske jagad och sårad, hade man beröft honom ungarne? Nej, det fanns icke bloddroppe i de bruna hären.” Molin, 65.
... now rushed after him, but could not keep the circle as narrow as Salmon; his body was too long ... and then he came back again so he shot back and forth at pointed angles ... made sharp twists and turns like a frightened pig ... threw about ... bumped ... roared so it slammed about it ... scratching the moss, so that the meager sandy ground looked up with elongated yellow eyes ... but always came to the side of Salmon. Twigs crumpled, and all the small stones rattled and shrieked.26

The fight, with the bear attacking and Salmon moving fast around the tree so that the bear misses him every time, is the core of the story. The fight goes on for a long time, with only occasional relief coming from Salmon’s thoughts of his wife in the agonies of childbirth and the children at home: “And mother, who worked all evening with hers—and waited … waited!”27

The bear’s rage is incomprehensible. Why does the bear not leave him be? This seemingly illogical fury makes the bear more monstrous. In medieval moral theology, a distinction was made between vice and sin. Vice was rooted in the very nature of a person, and hard to repress or control. Sin, on the other hand, arose from free and voluntary conduct (sometimes inspired by the Devil), and was, therefore, an offense against God.28 Given free will, one should be able to refrain from sin, correct oneself,

26 “Ett hopp i half cirkel och Nalle susade förbi, knappt en half aln ifrån. Det förefelade språnget slutade med ett tvärstopp i mossan, däri nosen plöjde en liten väg. Ett larmande ryt ... mossan refsv upp i tvärvändningen ... den stod som en sky ... och så kom han igen i blind ilska ... gjorde hastig halt invid trädet, då han såg Salmon vika undan ... rusade nu efter honom men kunde icke hålla cirkeln så snäf som Salmon; hans kropp var för lång ... och så bar det sig igen, att han sköt fram och tillbaka i spetsiga vinklar ... gjorde tvåra vändningar och kast som en skrämd gris ... kastade om ... stötte emot ... röt, så att det slamrade om det ... klöste i mossan, så att den magra sandjorden tittade upp med aflånga gula ögon ... men kom alltid på sidan om Salmon. Kvistar knastrade, och alla små stenar rasslade och skreko.” Molin, 64.


or, if a sin was committed, to confess. In medieval bestiaries, the bear was connected to vice. Animals did not commit sins, they were imperfect creatures, more or less vicious.

The bear, as Pastoureau points out, was for the Church Fathers and theologians of the Middle Ages the creature who had most vices. When during the thirteenth century the vices merged into the form of the seven deadly sins, as opposed to the seven virtues, each sin and virtue was associated with a certain number of animals. Lion, eagle, and horse were associated with virtue, while bear, fox, monkey, pig, and dog were always negatively connected with sin. Worst of all was the bear, who is associated with five of the seven sins; lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth: “From the thirteenth century, he was the star of this hateful bestiary, a sad fate for a wild animal who was once the king of the beasts.”

It is noteworthy, Pastoureau continues, that in the bestiary of the seven major sins, the two animals considered closest to humans, bear and pig, are the most devalued. Too close kinship with animals seems to be unbearable, and any such uncanny similarities are redressed through derogation, and in the case of the bear, extermination. The major monotheist religions, Pastoureau writes, “do not like animals that nature and culture have declared to be ‘cousins’ or ‘relatives’ of man. […] It has never been a good idea to resemble human beings to close.”

In Pelle Molin’s text, the bear’s incomprehensible and ongoing blind rage, its small glowing eyes, turn it into a devilish beast, much in the same way as the bear was described in the medieval bestiaries.

Nalle’s small pungent eyes glowed. The fur of the back lay tight, flat, backward. He had drawn his ears near the head. There was something of ice-cold determination in this com-

29 Pastoureau, 183.
30 Pastoureau, 184.
31 Pastoureau, 184.
rade in the forest. Without a moment’s pause he chased the skinny settler [...].

Its fury and ice-cold determination make the bear monstrous. At the same time, the passage, with the word “comrade”, suggests that there is a human, and therefore moral, resemblance with this raging adversary in the forest. As Pastoureau suggests, the border between human and animal must be maintained, partly on moral grounds. A too close resemblance between human and animal would ascribe not only free will and the possibility of voluntary good conduct to the animal but also a moral obligation from human to animal. One cannot just hunt and kill such a creature.

So, the bear could not be killed by a human being unless it was made into a monster. A fact true both on the individual level in Molin’s story as well as on the more overarching cultural level.

When Salmon realizes that he has his knife with him, he aims at the bear and manages to inflict a wound on the animal. Salmon’s act seals the battle. Now, one of them will die:

Now he knew that the game would not end until one of them lay cold and still. If the prospect of a peace settlement had been slight a little while ago, it was now null. It seemed clear now that it would be decided for Bear-Salmon whether he still was Bear-Salmon. Now, one of their lives would end, but hardly the bear’s ... in such uneven battle. Salmon thought, “It is not I who will become a widower this night; it’s mother who will be widowed ... mother, who is waiting for me.”


33 “Nu visste han, att leken icke skulle ändas förr än en af dem låg kall och stilla. Hade utsikten till en uppgörelse i godo för en stund sedan varit ringa, var den nu ingen. Det syntes tydligt, att nu skulle det gälla för Björn-Salmon, om han ännu var Björn-Salmon. Nu skulle enderas lif spillas, men knappast björnens ... i sådan
They fight for a long time, repeatedly attacking each other, the bear with all its force and Salmon with his knife. In the end, he manages to kill the bear. Exhausted, Salmon falls asleep. He wakes up half an hour later when a bear cub, who had been hiding in the tree, falls in his lap. The reader, and Salmon, then understand that the bear was not a crazy aggressive male, but a female desperately trying to protect her child. Had Salmon chosen another tree to hide behind or looked up, just once, the whole tragedy could have been averted. Or, had he managed to see the resemblance between himself and the bear, then he would have understood that the cause of agitation was the same for the bear. The bear had acted in the same way as Salmon: struggling and fighting to protect her family, her child.

Throughout, the story is told from the angle of Salmon, except for this penultimate paragraph, which takes the perspective of the bear cub. It breaks up the anthropocentric viewpoint and accentuates the similarities between man and bear. This sudden switch in narrative perspective gives an agency to the animal, to the enemy’s child, now an orphan:

It is the bear’s cub. He is uncertain of the importance of this deep silence after this long clamor. But he sees that mother made peace and the other too, and he feels the desire to get away from here. He has not been a little scared up here. Now he puts his paws next to the trunk and begins to slide down. It goes slowly at first…

It was not a sensible man’s gaze in Salmon when he was awakened by a heavy bundle which fell upon him. It was with him when he rushed to the village, something of a hunted quarry, a frightened grey tuft with something of the tail between his legs. There was nothing left of the night’s hero, of ojemn strid. Salmon tänkte: «det är icke jag, som blir änkläng i natt; det är mor, som blir änka ... mor, som väntar mig.» Molin, 69.
Bear-Salmon. It was only a starving settler, like a tree without twigs and alone, who ran for his poor life.34

When Salmon realizes what he has done, that he has killed the bear cub’s mother, and that the bear cub now is in exactly that position Salmon himself fought so hard to avoid for his own children, he is filled with shame. He saw a monster where there was a mother with a child. He runs into the village like a scared dog or even worse, emasculated, like a “grey tuft with something of the tail between his legs.”

Because he regarded the bear as a monster, the man himself was transformed into a monster, a shameful person. Thereby, both he and the bear become fredlösa, outlaws, that is homo/ursus sacer. As outlaws, as homo/ursus sacer they are an example of “bare life”. Here, the border between man and animal is obliterated: “a condition in which everyone is bare life and a homo sacer for everyone else, and in which everyone is thus wargus, gerit caput lupinum”, as Agamben writes.35 Salmon is overwhelmed, not by a “lurking anxiety” as Rohan called it, but by full-blown angst in his realization that there is no difference between his children and those of the bear. In killing the bear, he has protected himself and his children, but at the cost of someone else’s life, a poor little bear cub, who will now probably die of starvation. Bear and man are alike and thus have ethical responsibilities toward one another.


35 Agamben, 64. The term gerit caput lupinum (“may he wear a wolfish head” / “may his be a wolf’s head”) was used in medieval English law to describe an outlaw, someone who could be killed without penalty.
The masculinization in the bear hunt, a notion very much present in both Molin’s and Lagerlöf’s stories, can be traced back to the Icelandic sagas, where, as Lena Rohrbach has shown in *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur*, encounters between man and animal are much more common than in other European literature from the Middle Ages. The common encounter imagined with a bear is as hunter, a hunting that makes men more masculine. Salmon is initially presented as a man who has killed many bears, but in the end—after killing the story’s bear—he is described as a frightened creature who runs away with his tail between his legs. Killing a bear made him, in fact, lose his masculinity. As we shall see, Lagerlöf, who knew her Icelandic sagas by heart, depicts a similar process of emasculation in relation to an attempt to kill a bear. In the end, both stories implode this close connection of masculinity and the bear-killings, when it turns out that men who kill or plan to kill bears in fact become emasculated in one way or another.

Selma Lagerlöf’s “The Peace of God”

In Selma Lagerlöf’s short story “The Peace of God” (1899), it is not only the ethical relationship with the bear, but the bear’s moral agency, accentuated through the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Lagerlöf’s story takes place in the intersection between the Old Nordic belief in the holiness of the bear, a post-Darwinist insight into animals’ close connection to ourselves, and an animal rights perspective, which, with Christian roots, understands the bear as an endangered species. In “Gudsfreden,” Lagerlöf does this explicitly through a refer-

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37 Rohrbach, 201–202.
38 In her biography of Selma Lagerlöf Anna-Karin Palm shows how intensly Lagerlöf read the Icelandic sagas in her youth. Anna-Karin Palm, “Jag vill sätta världen i rörelse”: en biografi över Selma Lagerlöf (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2019), chapter 2.
ence to *Pax et treuga Dei* and, specifically, to the dictum to love thy neighbor as thyself, as it was formulated in the Gospel of Luke.40

When Lagerlöf opens up the religious domain for the bear, a connection is made with the ancient belief that the bear is holy. An associative link, a cultural bridge one might call it, is made between the pre-Christian view of the bear as sacred and the twentieth century’s endangered and protected bear. As Pastoreau has shown, up until the Middle Ages, the bear was the object of different cults across the European continent. In the Nordic region, the extolling of its sacred qualities went on much longer. In Finland, the traces of these bear ceremonies are very tangible and several songs in the *Kalevala* are today considered to be songs that were sung or recited next to the dead bear, often called “bear weddings.”41 Traces of these beliefs are also found in Sweden and occur into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It seems as if the beliefs and ceremonies surrounding the bear could co-exist with the Christian faith.

Common to these ceremonies, e.g. how the bear was approached and how one behaved after the bear was killed, is the respect and reverence shown to the powerful animal. The bear must never be killed in its sleep during hibernation. If it is winter, the bear must be awakened and lured out of its den. The ceremonies were often called the bear’s funeral feast, or, as

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40 The tradition from the Middle Ages was created in reaction to the constant fighting not only among the nobility, but noble men fighting also with everyone else. Peace was permanently proclaimed in certain buildings, as the church. And certain people like monks, clerics and women, cattle and horses, should always be protected by this peace. “The Truce of God” or *Treuga Dei* concerned only special periods and had its origin in Normandy in the city of Caen in the 11th century. The Truce of God peace was required throughout Advent, the season of Lent, and from the beginning of the Rogation days until eight days after Pentecost, and during certain days of the week. Lagerlöf’s inclusion of the wild animals in the category protected by the The Truce of God, was probably an accepted interpretation.

already mentioned, the bear’s wedding. There is an oral eyewitness account from as late as 1890 in Sweden.42

Lagerlöf’s story takes place on Christmas Eve in Ingmarsgården, the homestead of the rich Ingmarson family. The house is swept and cleaned until the very last minute, with the sauna heated so that everyone could take a bath before Christmas. The girl whose job it is to tie birch twigs for the sauna bath cannot properly perform her task since she has no thin sprigs with which to tie. As everyone is busy, old Ingmar Ingmarson decides to go out himself, and cut the sprigs. The wind blows, it snows intensely. The snowy wind makes old Ingmarson dizzy and on his way home he walks in the wrong direction, into the forest, instead of home over the fields. Lost in the woods, the reader follows a surprisingly long and scary description of how the old man walks in the blizzard in the woods, becoming increasingly tired while the dark descends upon him. Ingmarson understands that if he falls asleep, he will freeze to death. In the end, he gives up and crawls in under a heap of twigs. However, it turns out to be a bear’s den.

But when he pushed his body under the twigs, he felt that there was something warm and soft inside the pile. There must be a bear sleeping here, he thought. He felt how the animal was moving and heard how it was sniffing around in the air. He lay still anyway. He thought nothing other than that the bear could happily eat him. He could not take another step to get away from him. But the bear did not seem to want to do anything to the one who sought protection under his roof during such a stormy night. He moved a little further down in his den as if to make room for the guest, and shortly afterwards he slept with steady, hissing breath.43

42 Björklöf, 260.
43 “Men då han sköt in kroppen under kvistarna, kände han, att därinne i högen låg något, som var varmt och mjukt. Här ligger visst en björn och sover, tänkte han. Han kände hur djuret rörde sig och hörde hur det vädrade omkring sig. Han låg stilla i alla fall. Han tänkte intet annat än att björnen gärna kunde få äta upp
Old Ingmar Ingmarson is thus saved from freezing to death by the bear, who without harming him lets him share his den during the night. A true compassionate act.

While old Ingmarson is lost in the woods, everyone in his household wait at home, worrying; no one could do anything because of the storm. To calm everyone, Mrs Ingmarson reads from the Bible, and what she, more or less by coincidence, chooses to read is the story of the Good Samaritan:

The old woman read and read and came to the question: “Who was his neighbor, who came before the robbers?” But before she had time to read the answer, the door opened and old Ingmar entered the room.

“Mother, father is here,” said one of the daughters, and it was never read out loud, that the man’s neighbor was the one who had shown him mercy.44

So, the question of who the man’s neighbor is, was never answered. Nor does anyone bother to ask the question when it is agreed that they must hastily find and shoot the bear, rather than celebrate Christmas in joy, now that father had returned to them. “Because it is so,” says the text, “that the bear, it is a man’s duty to slay, where and when he comes upon him. It is not possible to spare a bear, because sooner or later he gets taste for meat, and then he saves neither animal nor man.45 But even


44 Den gamla kvinnan läste och läste och kom till frågan: »Hvilken var nu hans nästa, som för röfvarena kommen var?» Men innan hon hunnit läsa svaret, sköts dörren upp och gamle Ingmar kom in i rummet. »Mor, far är här,« sade en af döttrarna, och det blev aldrig upplöst, att mannens nästa var den, som hade bevisat honom barmhärtighet. Lagerlöf, “Gudsfreden,” 258.

though she knows this injunction well, Mrs. Ingmarson is distressed, and she continues to search in the Bible.

But after they had gone to the hunt, the old Mistress of the house felt a great anxiety come over her and had taken to reading. Now she began to read about what was preached in the church this day, but she came no further than to this, “Peace on earth, and Goodwill to all Men!” She remained sitting, and stared at these words with her fading eyes, and from time to time she drew a heavy sigh. She did not read any further, but she repeated again and again with a slow and dragging voice: Peace on earth, and Goodwill to all Men!”

Before she has even had time to formulate for herself what is amiss, the youngest son rushes in. He is very upset and can barely talk. She pats him on the cheek and holds him “as she has not done since he was a little boy.” He breaks down and starts crying.

‘I can understand that there is something about father,’
- ‘Yes, but it is worse than that,’ sobbed the son.
- ‘Is it worse than that?’ The man cried insconsolably, he knew not how to get power into his voice. Finally, he raised his coarse hand with his wide fingers and pointed to that, which she just had read.
- “Peace on earth, and Goodwill to all Men!”
- ‘Is there anything about this?’ she asked.
- ‘Yes’ he answered.
- ‘Is there something about Christmas peace?’
- ‘Yes.’
- ‘You wanted to do an evil act this morning.’

Finally, he tells her what happened. They had found the den and charged the guns. As mentioned earlier, in the old bear ceremonies it was forbidden to kill a bear while it was asleep. It was an act of disrespect. Now old Ingmar Ingmarson and his sons intended to kill the creature who saved him and break the ancient taboo about killing a sleeping bear. An animal, more to the point, that Lagerlöf’s contemporaries would have known to be endangered, no longer existing in Värmland, for example. And, on Christmas Eve itself, too, when peace is supposed to rule on earth! The violation can be indexed on many levels. The bear also literally strikes back: “he came straight on to the old Ingmar Ingmarson and gave him a blow over his head, which brought him down, as if he had been hit by lightning.” The bear does not care about the other hunters, he just kills old Ingmarsson, and then runs off into the forest.

Within the context of the story, God has punished Ingmar and his sons for not showing mercy to their neighbor. Realizing that they are the ones who have broken God’s Peace, and therefore have been punished by God, Mrs. Ingmarson insists that her

47 Jag kan förstå, att det är något med far,» sade hon.
- »Ja, men det är värre än så,» snyftade sonen.
- »Är det värre än så?» Karlen grät allt håftigare, han visste ej hur han skulle få makt med sin röst.
Slutligen lyfte han upp sin grofva hand med de breda fingrarna och pekade på detta, som hon nyss läst. »Frid på jorden.» - »Är det något med detta?» frågade hon.
- »Ja,» svarade han.
- »Är det något med julfreden?»
- »Ja.»
- »Ni ville göra en ond gärning i morse.»
- »Ja.» – »Och Gud har straffat oss?»
husband’s funeral should be as low key as possible. The bear and the human both become homo/ursus sacer here. When Ingmarson and his son went out to kill the bear, they treated the bear as fredlös, as someone that could be killed but not sacrificed, as excluded from both profane and divine law. But, in the end it is old Ingmarson, punished by God and killed by the bear, and then deprived of having a high-status funeral, thereby expelling him from both the divine and profane order, who has become a homo sacer, a fredlös. Again, man and bear are interconnected, they both mirror each other and change places.

But at Christmas, God has declared peace between animals and humans, and while the poor animal respected God’s command, we broke it, and now it is we who face God’s punishment. [Mrs Ingmarson says]49

The bear becomes, in Lagerlöf’s story, not only man’s neighbor but a creature with a moral agency. In contrast to the humans, the bear has acted in accord with God’s commandments. It is the bear who chooses to be a merciful Samaritan, and who also has the ability to see that thy neighbor can be someone who is different from oneself, even someone regarded as an enemy. Animals and people have always been a part of God’s kingdom, but in Lagerlöf’s story they become equal moral beings in mutual dialogue. Only that it is man who betray the agreement with the animals and therefore is punished by God. By making bear and human equal moral beings before God, Lagerlöf rejects anthropocentrism, which places man, as an image of God, at the center of the universe.

As is often the case with Lagerlöf, her stories can be read both secularly and religiously. Read from a cultural-historical perspective, and framed in post-Darwinian terms, Lagerlöf here seems to undermine the evolutionary logic that says that man is

the crown of evolution and thus can do what he wants with more primitive beings. From an animal rights perspective, it is possible to read the story as an intervention in the political debates at the time, where in the Swedish newspapers of the 1890s it was possible to read the call “Don’t let the bear be exterminated.”

When this story is related to older conceptions of the bear, such as in accounts where the bear was seen as omniscient, with the ability to understand human speech, we can see that Lagerlöf’s representation follows a well established but forgotten history; her short story becomes an example of a bear who hears and knows everything. That the bear is awake and hears how the hunters are gathering outside, that the bear understands what they are planning, and knows who the culprit is—it is only old Ingmarson the bear attacks—seems to testify to the notion that the bear understands human speech. Old Ingmarson has in every sense failed in respect to the bear, irrespective of whether the animal is regarded as sacred or man’s neighbor in a Christian sense.

In the end, the bear and old Ingmarson share the same place in the universe, and the same condition of having become fredlösa, that is, sacer in Agamben’s sense of being a hybrid between man and animal: “a realm of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the loup garou, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.”

**Ursus sacer**—bear death as bare life

As Ella Odsted has pointed out in her book from 1949 on werewolf-belief in Sweden there are strong beliefs concerning

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51 Björklöf, 270.
52 Agamben, 63.
animal transformation into both wolf and bear in Swedish and Nordic folklore. In the northern part of Scandinavia shape-shifting occurs with bears rather than wolves, which means that in the North the werewolf is actually a werebear. It is reflected in expressions like “run bear,” “go bear,” “go into bear shape,” “turn into bear.” The human being who becomes fredlös is a hybrid of human and animal, a kind of shapeshifter, a werewolf, or rather a werebear. To quote Agamben again: “What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city.”

In the connection between homo sacer, the Germanic and Scandinavian concept of fredlöshet/Friedlosigkeit and werewolves, pointed out by Agamben, the bear in its complex tradition of werebears, holy bears, and bears as fredlösa with a bounty on their heads, can be understood as ursus sacer—and by extension it can be regarded as a political category. For Agamben this original ban of the homo sacer, this lychantropy, is directly connected to the law and the city. Bare life or sacred life are both always present and always presuppose sovereignty. Agamben sees this in contrast to our modern way of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts.

53 Ella Odstedt, Varulven i svensk folktradition (1948; repr., Täby: Malört, 2012), 95.
54 In Swedish: Löpa björn, gå björn, gå i björnhamm, vänd till björn. The idea of self-transformation was most common in Jämtland, Härjedalen, Dalarna and Värmland, but also in Ångermanland. The shape shifter commonly turns into a wolf or a bear. In Dalarna and Värmland shape shifting can only be into bear. The most common causes of shape shifting were ravenousness, pleasure or revenge. The notion that some people can cast a spell on others in order to make them shapeshift into a predator exists all over Sweden. Odstedt, 63–65, 95. Lagerlöf relates to this notion of humans magically turned into bears with the story of the bear from Gurlitta in the The Saga of Gösta Berling, which only a bullet made from a church-bell’s metal can kill.
55 Agamben, 63.
56 Agamben, 64.
Agamben wants to reread Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s foundational myth of the city. According to Agamben, the city is not founded on the citizen’s free will. The state of nature, he writes, is in truth a state of exception. It is not something founded once and for all, but instead something continually operative in the civil state in the form of sovereign decisions. What is more, the latter refers immediately to the life (and not the free will) of citizens. Thus, it is life as such that appears as the originary political element, the Urphänomen of politics, we can say. Yet this life is not simply natural reproductive life, the zoē of the Greeks, nor bios, a qualified form of life. It is, rather, the bare life of homo sacer and the wargus, a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture.

Not only is bare life the Urphänomen of politics, but it is so in a “continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture.” If we follow Agamben’s argument on homo sacer, politics and the city, further by returning to the picture of von Rosen standing next to the dead bears, we can consider their corpses, the ursus sacer, as in political terms. The dead bears are displayed on the street outside von Rosen’s home in Stockholm. It happens to be on Strömgatan, facing the Royal castle, and the parliament. The heads of the dead bears are pointing in the direction of the sovereign. They are the city’s wargus, the were-bear, which, according to Agamben, as quoted above, is the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. Expunged of its once holy status, and killed for a bounty, the dead bears facing the castle become the sign of that indistinguishable line between human and animal, culture and nature. Bear death as bare life. Von Rosen’s violent act of exhibiting the dead bears in the city in view of the King, also shows who has been banned from the city and the culture. The bear. Michel Pastoureau

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57 Agamben, 65.  
58 Agamben, 65.
argued: “In killing the bear, his kinsman, his fellow creature, his first God, man long ago killed his own memory.”

If the *urphänomen* of politics is an always already trespassed line between human and animal, between culture and nature, then the bear is as every bit political as humans. We do not need to transcend or question the anthropocentric paradigm, because the political realm is always already crossed, muted and mixed in a never-ending transition between man and beast. When considered as a political notion, *ursus sacer* reminds us that in bare life there is no difference between humans and animals. We share the same habitat, in nature as in the city.

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59 Pastoureau, 239.