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# To Scandinavia with Love, or It's Complicated: Linguistic and Corporeal Border Dynamics in Johanna Frid's *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn*

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## *Abstract*

The article is a study of border dynamics in Johanna Frid's novel *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* (2018). With a theoretical framework from literary multilingualism studies, the article shows how the topic of troubled borders between Scandinavian languages in the novel is entangled with questions of geographical, medial, emotional, and corporeal borders. The troubled dynamics of borders is shown to be a central organising factor in the text. In addition, the friction between the thematical treatment of languages and the text's multilingual praxis is analysed, focusing on its artistically productive effects regarding the experiences of the novel's readers.

**Keywords:** Bordering, Endometriosis, Literary Multilingualism, Scandinavia, Swedish Literature

## *Introduction*

Vi hade känt varandra i snart ett år, och varit kærester i några månader. Vi började få lättare att förstå varandra, språkförbistringen till trots. Man ska inte bara lära känna en annan människa och ett annat skandinaviskt språk, utan också hur den människan talar sitt eget skandinaviska språk. [...] Den gradvisa förståelse jag trodde var rådande mellan grannländerna existerade överhuvudtaget inte; det krävdes Google translate, svett och långa tolkningsdiskussioner [...]. (Frid 2018, 8-10)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trans.: We had known each other for almost a year and been kærester [Danish for boyfriend and girlfriend; *kæreste* literally means "dearest"] for a few months. We started to understand each other more easily, despite the language

Contemporary Nordic literature is an arena where language borders are contested, transgressed and re-drawn. Works of fiction can make use of several languages and present reflections on languages and their relationship with each other. Subsequently, through both linguistic praxis and thematic treatment, such works can engage readers in reflective processes of language learning that are of literary importance.

Swedish author Johanna Frid's debut novel *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* (2018), in English "Nora or Burn Oslo Burn", is one such novel.<sup>2</sup> Linguistically and thematically, the novel is centred in Scandinavia, its countries, languages and borders. The novel's narrator-protagonist, the Swedish university student Johanna, is in a romantic relationship with Emil from Denmark. Early in their relationship, Johanna becomes obsessed with Emil's Norwegian ex-girlfriend Nora, whom she starts to stalk on social media. *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is a darkly humorous story of love, social media, the illness of endometriosis, Scandinavia and its languages. Using Facebook jargon, Johanna's relationship status regarding all these topics can be described as "it's complicated".

In this article, I explore the novel's multilingualism in terms of both linguistic praxis and thematic treatment from the viewpoint of border dynamics. By placing attention on border permeability, transgression and creation, it is possible, I argue, to show the intimate interconnectedness of the seemingly very different thematic threads of Scandinavia, languages, love, endometriosis, and social media that recur throughout the novel. Moreover, I argue that *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is an excellent example of how linguistically heterogeneous texts are not simply meant to be comprehended or decoded by readers; conversely, such texts are able to "perform" frictions of language learning and belonging; hence, they engage readers in processes of language learning.

After delineating the article's theoretical framework, I proceed to analyse the novel's treatment of Scandinavia and Scandinavian languages in connection with love, endometriosis and social media. This is followed by a discussion of the novel's linguistic praxis and its artistically productive tension with the novel's thematic treatment of language before reflecting on what this entails for the novel's readers.

### 1. Theoretical Framework: Literary Multilingualism, Linguistic Borders and Readers

Since literature is simultaneously an art form and a form of cultural and social expression, the meaning and consequences of literary multilingualism changes along with linguistic, societal and, not least, literary norms and paradigms. To grasp the effects of literary multilingualism, careful consideration should be given not only to its specific form in the text in question but also to the linguistic and literary norms that surround the text and its readers (Yildiz 2012, 25).

In Western literature, we cannot bypass the monolingual paradigm that has shaped society, literature and scholarship on literature and languages and which Yasemin Yildiz explores in her seminal *Beyond the Mother Tongue*. Within the monolingual paradigm, monolingualism:

barrier. You should not only get to know another person and another Scandinavian language, but also how that person speaks their own Scandinavian language. [...] The gradual understanding I thought prevailed between the neighbouring countries did not exist at all; it required Google translate, sweat, and long discussions about interpretations [...]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from Frid's novel into English are mine. In the case of multilingual passages, I have endeavoured to translate in a way that retains the multilingualism of the original. In the translations, non-English words are only given in italics if they are in italics in the original Swedish edition of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of its publication in 2018, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* garnered great critical attention and acclaim but has not yielded much scholarly attention. Hitherto, Mäkelä and colleagues' study on narrative and digital capital (Mäkelä *et al.* 2025) is the only research publication on the novel apart from some digitally archived undergraduate theses. The textual multilingualism of and/or the discussion on languages in the novel has not been acknowledged previously.

constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation. (2)

The monolingual paradigm not only leads to multilingual practices becoming obscured but also to “processes of monolingualization”, “which have produced more monolingual subjects, more monolingual communities, and more monolingual institutions” (*ibidem*). The institutional levels include those of linguistics and literary studies. Although contemporary linguistics has abandoned the conception of artefactualised national languages (Blommaert 2010), the perception of languages as distinct entities, whole unto themselves, is a legacy of nationalist language ideology that has taken part in the structuring of the field of linguistics and which influences everyday conceptions of languages even today. In the field of literary studies, the monolingual paradigm has often led to the linguistic heterogeneity of literary texts to be obscured, something that literary multilingualism studies have attempted to rectify (see e.g., Yildiz 2012; Dembeck 2014). My reading of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is in accordance with this “de-monolingualising” endeavour to draw attention to how a text which is easily read as monolingual, is in fact intensely multilingual and concerned with questions of language borders.

As part of the critical scrutiny of the monolingual paradigm, literary multilingualism studies have striven to question the very “multi-” in multilingualism, as the concept of languages as countable entities is a part of monolingual language ideology. Here, the figure of the border has been central (see e.g., Tidigs and Huss 2017; Kauranen, Huss and Grönstrand 2020). Literary multilingualism studies today are characterised by an increasing awareness of the dynamics of linguistic borders and their impact on literary texts and their readers. Traditionally, literary multilingualism was treated as a stable phenomenon concerning texts that contained several national languages and where the meaning of this multilingualism resided in the text, ready to be deciphered by the linguistically competent reader. This stance is increasingly being substituted for a study of literary multilingualism as a phenomenon where languages and linguistic borders are performed, in reading, by readers who differ but cannot be neatly categorised and whose affective responses to these texts are of real significance for the literary scholar (Tidigs and Huss 2017; Kleveland 2020, 183; Nykvist 2020; Tidigs and Bodin 2020; Tidigs 2020).

In this context, the figure of the border, not as a fact or object but as a “process”, is central. In “How Do We Count a Language? Translation and Discontinuity”, translation scholar Naoki Sakai has emphasised the processual and performative character of translation: “translation is not only a border crossing but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of *bordering*” (2008, 83). Translation understood as bordering encompasses a process where the linguistic border is marked in the very act of border crossing; there is no translation without a linguistic border that is highlighted and manifested when it is crossed (82-83). In literary studies, Sakai’s use of bordering has inspired scholars to describe the delicate and complex work that readers perform in the act of reading the linguistically heterogeneous text:

Instead of defining the multilingual literary text as a definitive textual configuration containing a specific number of languages, we wish to argue [...] for an understanding of the multilingual literary text that takes the reader into account, and especially how the text encourages the reader to engage in different bordering processes. (Tidigs and Huss 2017, 219)

Processes of translation occur not only in the multilingual text itself but also between text and reader. There is no ideal reader of multilingual texts; instead, partial fluency (Walkowitz 2015, 42-44) or even incomprehension can give rise to aesthetic effects among different readers. Instead of as a passive recipient, I have argued together with Markus Huss for “a focus on the reader as co-creator of the multilingual text” (Tidigs and Huss 2017, 210). Here, the linguistic competence of the reader is not static. As Kleveland has emphasised, the traditional categorisation of readers into an in-group or an out-group does not account for the fact that each reader possesses a unique linguistic and cultural competence, which is not static but in continual development (2020, 183). The reading of a text is an event that takes place at a certain place and time and at a certain point in this development (184); thus, the reader’s contribution to the meaning-making process of literary multilingualism is contextual (193).

These developments in literary multilingualism studies inform my reading of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* as a novel that exposes, questions and explores power asymmetries between languages and involves its readers in a learning process. It is a novel that is intensely occupied with questions of linguistic unity and fragmentation, comprehension and misunderstanding as well as borders and their permeability. These questions also exist at the core of literary multilingualism studies today.

## 2. *Scandinavian Struggles*

Scandinavian languages are neighbouring languages whose proximity is both geographical and linguistic (Gooskens 2024, 8). They are often given as a prime example of intercomprehension among languages; however, this mutual intelligibility is asymmetric due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors; the asymmetry between Danish and Swedish is one of the most well-known cases (151). Danish speakers both understand and display more positive attitudes towards Swedish than vice versa (152-53 and 158). Such questions of intercomprehension and its asymmetries are central to *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn*. In the first chapter, Johanna relates the story of her relationship with Emil, which turns out to be a reflection on language learning and (un)intelligibility:

Vi pluggade tillsammans, och jag kände mig oerhört dum som inte kunde urskilja något ur ordmassorna. När Emil och den andra danska studenten pratade den första undervisningsdagen slutade jag helt enkelt att lyssna. Det var värre än att ha en radio inställd mellan två stationer, mer som att försöka skölja ris i ett för grovt durkslag eller läsa i kaffesump. (Frid 2018, 9)<sup>3</sup>

Emil hade hursomhelst lättare att förstå mig än jag honom när vi rökte på rasten, vilket gjorde samtalet egendomligt haltande. Det var första gången jag kom i kontakt med det ansiktsuttryck som jag senare lärde mig var standard för möten skandinavisktalande emellan – en stelrande fasa och en ovilja att ge uttryck för att man faktiskt inte förstår. De flesta föredrog att låta språkförbistringen och förvirringen växa så att samtalet så småningom rann ut i sanden. (9-10)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Trans.: We studied together, and I felt extremely stupid for not being able to distinguish anything from the masses of words. When Emil and the other Danish student spoke on the first day of class, I simply stopped listening. It was worse than having a radio tuned between two stations, more like trying to rinse rice in too coarse a colander or read coffee grounds.

<sup>4</sup> Trans.: In any case, Emil had an easier time understanding me than I him when we smoked during the break, which made the conversation strangely halting. It was the first time I came into contact with the facial expression that I later learned was standard for meetings between Scandinavian speakers – a freezing horror and an unwillingness to

The chapter highlights the painstaking and often unsuccessful work of inter-Scandinavian understanding, and the emphasis on struggle, confusion and halting conversation continues throughout the novel. As the passages show, the struggles are asymmetrical as Emil understands Johanna more easily and is less bothered by partial incomprehension: “Trots att de andra i klassen också tycktes ha svårigheter med kommunikationen verkade det inte bekomma varken honom eller hans landsman särskilt mycket” (9).<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of whether Johanna fails to understand Emil or is herself misunderstood, it is she who suffers. When her fingers get caught in a patio door and she screams out in pain and panic, it takes Emil a long time to react and come to her aid. He later explains: “Jag glemte hvad aj betyder på svensk” (41).<sup>6</sup> Even expressions of pain become lost in translation, and the border between languages seems absolute.

Still, Johanna continues to try to learn Danish and the difficulty of this task only serves to highlight her dedication, the origins of which she does not herself quite understand.<sup>7</sup> “Vår relation utvecklade sig i takt med min danskförståelse. I mars kunde jag lyssna på DR:s *Skønlitteratur på P1* och Emil frågade om vi var kærester” (11).<sup>8</sup> Although Johanna continually stresses the border between Danish and Swedish and her struggles to overcome it, language learning and romantic attachment are intimately intertwined.

With Emil’s ex-girlfriend Nora, Norway and Norwegian enter the equation. Nora is a highly symbolic name, epitomising Norwegianness both through its phonetic similarity to Norge/Norway and through its reference to Norwegian literature’s most famous heroine, Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. When Johanna reflects upon the name, the connection with normality predominates: “Hon skulle kunna heta Synnøve, eller Wenche eller Ragnhild men Nora var ett helt normalt namn. Norskt och normalt” (8).<sup>9</sup> To Johanna, Nora is equated with Norway, as well as with normality: she is beautiful, well-behaved and most of all flawless.

In comparison, Johanna describes herself as a “svensk galning”<sup>10</sup> (102) and as someone who is difficult in an untranslatable way: “Naturligtvis var jag för jobbig. Ett ord så fasansfullt att det inte ens kan översättas till danska” (66).<sup>11</sup> Just as normality is an intrinsic part of Nora’s Norwegianness, being difficult is a part of Johanna’s Swedishness. In her attempt to control her

express that you cannot actually understand. Most people preferred to let the language bewilderment and confusion grow so that the conversation eventually fizzled out into nothing.

<sup>5</sup> Trans.: Although the other classmates also seemed to experience difficulties with communication it did not seem to bother him or his fellow countryman very much.

<sup>6</sup> Trans.: I forgot what ow means in Swedish.

<sup>7</sup> “Även om danskan och svenskan är grannspråk är de ljudmässiga skillnaderna stora, avgörande ord och meningskonstruktioner skiljer sig markant från varandra. Med andra ord är det ett ambitiöst arbete. Men det var inte förälskelse som fick mig att vilja tränga in i dessa skillnader. Det var ingenting som gick att ta på, bara en plötslig målmedvetenhet. I december tyckte jag mig behärska språket nog för att träffa Emil på tu man hand” (Frid 2018, 10). Trans.: Even if Danish and Swedish are neighbouring languages, the phonological differences are great, decisive words and sentence constructions differ markedly from each other. In other words, it is an ambitious task. But it was not being in love that made me want to penetrate these differences. It was nothing tangible, only a sudden purposefulness. In December I thought my grasp of the language was good enough to meet Emil one-on-one.

<sup>8</sup> Trans.: Our relationship developed in sync with my comprehension of Danish. In March, I could listen to DR:s [Danish radio’s] *Skønlitteratur på P1* [*Fiction/belles lettres on Programme 1*] and Emil asked if we were kærester [boyfriend and girlfriend, see footnote 1.]

<sup>9</sup> Trans.: She could have been named Synnøve, or Wenche or Ragnhild but Nora was a completely normal name. Norwegian and normal.

<sup>10</sup> Trans.: Swedish lunatic.

<sup>11</sup> Trans.: Of course I was too difficult [jobbig]. A word so horrible that it cannot even be translated into Danish.

ever-increasing obsession with Nora, Johanna tries a similar strategy to her romantic attachment to Emil: language learning. She studies Norwegian literature and even makes plans to establish a Scandinavian literary journal (104-105), but however hard she tries, she remains an inferior version of Nora: “[...V]i stod i samma position, men att hon alltid skulle göra det bättre. Att hon också bara var en skandinavisk kvinna med ett mjukt inre. Fast bättre” (151).<sup>12</sup>

In a sort of parodical version of the monolingual paradigm, Johanna equates the individual with language and nation – Johanna’s, Emil’s, and Nora’s interpersonal relationships are directly mirrored on the national level and Johanna revels in popular Scandinavian stereotypes. (Indeed, one possible reading of the novel is as an allegory of inter-Scandinavian relations with the three main characters as personifications of stereotypical conceptions of the three countries). Emil is the relaxed Dane who speaks happily of “den transcendentala känslan av att befinna sig i tre skandinaviska språk samtidigt, den sublimes upplevelsen av hur norskan och svenskan öppnar valv efter valv i själen” (69).<sup>13</sup> Johanna half-jokingly remarks that he seems to be longing for a tour of the Nordic countries (46), that she is adding another colour to Emil’s Scandinavian flag banner of women and wonders if he aims to complete it with a Finnish pennant next.<sup>14</sup> Norway is conifer trees, mountain tops, oil funds (21) and most of all – Nora:

Nora smälte ihop med sitt land, porträttet var tydligare än någon karta. Det var bilden av en annan geografisk möjlighet och allt vad det innebar. Ett annat liv. Snö. Ren, ren snö. Skidåkning. Ett sundare liv, rikare, mer fulländat. Fasta kroppar som gled i spåren och röda kinder. [...] I Norge var allt som hemma fast bättre. Skogarna djupare, kronorna värda mer. (22)<sup>15</sup>

The dynamics among Scandinavian countries appear to exist in a set hierarchy. Just as the portrait of Nora points at Johanna, “Mot mitt fula ansikte”<sup>16</sup> (21), Sweden is an inferior version of Norway. Johanna both struggles with this division and hierarchy and seems to wish to reinforce it. In the following, I discuss the intricate entanglements of linguistic, national, medial, intimate and corporeal border dynamics in the novel.

### 3. Border Troubles

The physicality of language is highlighted at the very beginning of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* with the heading of the first chapter: “Mitt språk i din mun” (Frid 2018, 7).<sup>17</sup> Language is situated corporeally; moreover, a figure of boundary-crossing is introduced as the narrator’s language has entered someone else’s bodily cavity. As language learning and falling in love are closely connected for Johanna, it becomes clear that the crossing of boundaries – linguistic,

<sup>12</sup> Trans.: [...W]e stood in the same position but that she would always do it better. That she was also just a Scandinavian woman with a soft inside. But better.

<sup>13</sup> Trans.: [T]he transcendental feeling of finding oneself in three Scandinavian languages at once, the sublime experience of how Norwegian and Swedish open vault after vault in the soul.

<sup>14</sup> “Nu var det min tur att uppleva Odense i sommarskrud och lägga ytterligare en färg till Emils skandinaviska flaggspele. Jag undrade om han skulle komplettera med en finsk vimpel, men avstod från att fråga” (Frid 2018, 16). Trans.: Now it was my turn to experience Odense in its summer glory and add another color to Emil’s Scandinavian flag game. I wondered if he would add a Finnish pennant, but refrained from asking.

<sup>15</sup> Trans.: Nora melted together with her country; the portrait was more legible than any map. It was the image of a different geographical possibility and all that it entailed. Another life. Snow. Pure, pure snow. Cross-country skiing. A healthier life, richer, more perfect. Firm bodies that glided along the tracks and red cheeks. [...] In Norway everything was like at home, but better. The forests deeper, the crowns [money] worth more.

<sup>16</sup> Trans.: at my ugly face.

<sup>17</sup> Trans.: My language in your mouth.

corporeal, and emotional – are a prerequisite for love and intimacy. Simultaneously, however, Johanna struggles with the uncertainty of boundaries of a personal, linguistic, spatial and corporeal kind.

Johanna's confrontation with the (perceived) perfection of Nora represents a crossing of borders that threatens Johanna's very sense of selfhood: "Jag visste inte längre var gränsen mellan Nora och mig gick, denna dunkande längtan. Vad var det som fick gränserna att upplösas?" (159).<sup>18</sup> In stark contrast to Emil's vision of the relationship between Scandinavian countries and languages in terms of transcendental feelings or colourful flags, Johanna's view of the relationship between Scandinavian countries and languages and, by extension, Johanna, Emil and Nora, is depicted in military terms along with metaphors of battle and invasion. When she travels to Denmark, she remembers the march of warrior king Charles X Gustav (15) and when she questions Emil about Nora, she thinks of it as crossing the Great Belt (27), evoking memories of the 17<sup>th</sup> century wars between Denmark and Sweden. She has fantasies of bombing Norway (70) and when she contacts Nora, she describes this as entering Norwegian territory with cannons that shoot pig's blood (98). The military metaphors emphasise Johanna's violent experience of border instability:

Det var svårt att säga om det var jag som ockuperade Norge eller Nora som ockuperade mig. Det enda som var uppenbart var att det var plågsamt, gränsöverskridande. Det kom både utifrån och inifrån och det gick inte att värja sig. (93)<sup>19</sup>

Since Nora and Norway are equated, it is not only Nora but also Norway that invades Johanna's life:

Norge växte. Det spred sig utanför nationsgränsen och erövrade ett allt större område. Det åt upp mig i rött, blått och vitt. Hade jag haft möjlighet att bränna en flagga hade jag gjort det. Istället lånade jag en bok i nynorsk och anmälde mig till en orienterande kurs i norsk litteratur. If you can't beat them, join them? (92)<sup>20</sup>

Here, Norway is a conquering power, expanding beyond its borders and devouring Johanna in the colours of its flag. The boundary between Nora and Norway has long since dissolved and the boundary between Johanna and Nora is painfully unstable. But Nora and Norway are not the only painful and boundary-crossing things depicted in terms of expansion and conquest and as "eating" Johanna "in red, blue and white". Johanna's illness of endometriosis is depicted in an almost identical fashion:

Det fanns ärrvävnad i rött, som visade på pågående inflammationer, och ärrvävnad och sammanväxningar i vitt och blått. Endometriosen växte. Den spred sig utanför livmoderns gränser och erövrade allt större områden. Den åt mig i rött, blått och vitt. (131-32)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Trans.: I no longer knew where the border between Nora and me went, this pounding longing. What was it that made the borders dissolve?

<sup>19</sup> Trans.: It was difficult to say if I was occupying Norway or if Nora was occupying me. The only thing obvious was that it was painful, boundary-crossing. It came from both outside and inside and it was impossible to defend oneself.

<sup>20</sup> Trans.: Norway grew. It spread beyond the national border and conquered an increasingly larger area. It ate me in red, blue and white. If I had had the possibility to burn a flag I would have. Instead, I borrowed a book in Nynorsk and signed up for an introductory course in Norwegian literature. If you can't beat them, join them?

<sup>21</sup> Trans.: There was scar tissue in red that showed ongoing inflammations and scar tissue and adhesions in white

Endometriosis is a disease defined by border transgressions. Tissue similar to uterine tissue grows outside of the uterus, causing severe pain and possible infertility (World Health Organization 2025). The image on the cover of the novel's Swedish edition features a segment of the Norwegian romantic painter Johan Christian Dahl's famous landscape painting *View from Stalheim* (1842). Above the rounded peak of Jordalknuten at the centre is the golden imprint of the female reproductive organs. The cover connects Norway and endometriosis, an outer landscape and an intracorporeal one, just as they are connected for Johanna in the text. Placed beneath the stylised, abstract version of the reproductive systems, another reading of the rugged and forest-clad Norwegian mountains is suggested: as endometrioma-laden organs.

Nora is equated with Norway and, in turn, with endometriosis; corporeal suffering is mirrored by emotional and territorial transgressions. Indeed, I argue that the very abundance of border-crossings – the impossibility to contain oneself within certain boundaries and, instead, transgressing them and latching on to foreign territories, resulting in painful adhesions – can be read as the logic of endometriosis pushing beyond its corporeal territory and spreading to all other areas of Johanna's life – as well as dominating the thematic structure of the novel. Certainly, in her depiction of Johanna as plagued by an illness which centres on the uterus, Frid also invokes the complex cultural history of hysteria as an illness linked to the female reproductive organs (see Bernhardsson 2010, 120-21), just as she references the conception of women and the female body as being “too much”: “kvinnokroppen som överdrivet kroppslig, ohämmad, gränslös och svämmande över sina bräddar” (167).<sup>22</sup>

In the continuous crossings of borders between inside and outside, body and geography, not only do military metaphors adhere to personal – emotional and bodily – spheres, but corporeal language also becomes attached to both emotional turmoil and geographies. Johanna's response to the pain that the constant – internal and external – border struggles cause her is sudden bursts into the scatological and sexual. In Johanna's narration, Norway brings on a drastic stylistic shift into dark, scatological humour and kamikaze bursts of bad taste. She compares Norway to a urinary infection,<sup>23</sup> and notes that “Oslo lät misstänkt likt arse. Oschlo. *Hon bor ju i Arse*, översatte jag” (Frid 2018, 14).<sup>24</sup> The perceived phonetic similarity between Oslo and “arse” inspires more crude outbursts: “Åk tillbaka till Arse då. Åk dit och knulla henne i röven” (96-97; see also 108); “Mitt hjärta var fullt av skit. Av Norge” (22).<sup>25</sup> The scatological thread introduces yet another adhesion between inside and outside, corporeal and territorial, in the novel.

Johanna's crude outbursts are an unsuccessful defence mechanism with which she tries to manage the overwhelming feelings of insecurity from which she suffers and which she compares to the image of Nora's perfect Norwegian life. Because Nora and Norway are not “shit” – they are beautiful, superior and most of all, beloved. Notes on the back cover of the novel claim that

and blue. The endometriosis was growing. It spread beyond the borders of the uterus and conquered increasingly larger areas. It ate me in red, blue and white.

<sup>22</sup> Trans.: [...]the female body as excessively corporeal, unrestrained, boundless and overflowing. These aspects of the novel warrant further exploration that is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>23</sup> “Emil sov och Oslo trängde sig på. Som en elak urinvägsinfektion. Och istället för att ta en penicillinkur och dricka mycket vatten fortsatte jag att torka mig från röven; bakifrån och framåt” (Frid 2018, 70). Trans.: Emil slept and Oslo thrust itself on me. Like a nasty urinary infection. And instead of taking a course of penicillin and drinking lots of water I continued to wipe my arse; from back to front.

<sup>24</sup> Trans.: Oslo sounded suspiciously like arse. Oschlo. *She lives in Arse*, I translated.

<sup>25</sup> Trans.: Go back to Arse then. Go back there and fuck her in the arse; My heart was full of shit. Of Norway.

it investigates “två av vår tids stora kvinnosjukdomar – Instagram och endometrios”.<sup>26</sup> Johanna’s jealousy is fed by the image of Nora’s life that she sees glimpses of online. Social media plays a crucial part in facilitating Johanna’s obsession and social media’s border-shifting properties are an intrinsic part of the overall border dynamics in the novel.

Johanna’s “light stalking” (31) of Nora brings on its own border transgressions:

Att hitta rätt var att träda in i ett nytt rum. Världen fick en ny horisont. Att inta någons internet-tillvaro var en sällsam känsla, att gå in i ett rum som var både privat och offentligt. Man betraktar det med uppmaningen att titta men det är ändå ett intrång. (*Ibidem*)<sup>27</sup>

The space of social media transcends and destabilises the inner–outer and the private–public divide; it is no surprise that Johanna is as tempted as she is plagued by this. After opening the social media portal to Nora, Nora is a constant companion wherever Johanna goes: “Hon var med oss hela tiden” (38).<sup>28</sup> As Christian Refsum has shown, female protagonists being placed in a permanent state of longing through the ever-present possibility of contact that the smartphone enables, is an established motif in contemporary Scandinavian literature. The difference with Frid’s novel is that here, longing is not directed toward a male romantic partner, but toward another woman. However, similarly to the approach in other novels, the space that the smartphone opens is affective and intimate (2020, 115-17).

The social media version of Nora becomes a distorting mirror in which Johanna views herself and according to which she fails in every way. Here, Nora is overwhelmingly loved by her mother, Guro, who posts pictures with captions such as “*Verdens vakreste menneske eller Nora, lyset mitt!*” (Frid 2018, 72; see also 92).<sup>29</sup> Johanna exclaims: “Hur kan man vara så älskad, hur gör man för att bli sådär älskad [...]” (74; see also 91).<sup>30</sup> In contrast, Johanna’s mother is absent from her life. She is not spoken of explicitly; instead, Johanna’s lack of relationship to her emerges only indirectly, as when Johanna fantasises that Emil’s father asks if she is an orphan and that Emil would reply: “Nej nej [...], hun har bara ikke nogen, der elsker hende!” (120).<sup>31</sup> It can also be implied from Johanna’s strong reaction to Guro liking one of her comments: “Noras mamma hade sett mig. Hon erkände min existens. Hon godkände mig på det mest fundamentala, grundläggande sätt man kan uppmärksamma en annan människa på. Like” (180).<sup>32</sup>

Johanna’s obsession with Nora concerns more than romantic jealousy as it centres on the loving gaze from mother to daughter. One of Johanna’s friends gives her a pin with Nora’s face on it:

<sup>26</sup> Trans.: [T]wo of the great women’s diseases of our time – Instagram and endometriosis. Mäkelä *et al.* (2025) mention endometriosis in connection to click-bait journalism and relatability.

<sup>27</sup> Trans.: Finding the right one was like entering a new space. The world was given a new horizon. To occupy someone’s internet existence was a peculiar feeling, to walk into a space that that was both private and public. You view it with the invitation to look but it is still an intrusion. Note: The Swedish word “*rum*” can refer to both the more concrete “room” and the more abstract “space”.

<sup>28</sup> Trans.: She was with us the entire time.

<sup>29</sup> Trans.: *The world’s most beautiful person or Nora, light of my life!*. The text in italics is in Norwegian (and in italics) in the original.

<sup>30</sup> Trans.: How can you be that loved; what do you *do* to become so loved [...].

<sup>31</sup> Trans.: No no [...] she just hasn’t got anyone who loves her!

<sup>32</sup> Trans.: Nora’s mother had seen me. She acknowledged my existence. She approved of me in the most fundamental, basic way that you can acknowledge another human being. Like.

Den var internetkärleken förkroppsligad: den rymde allt som passerat mellan mammans ögon och Noras ansikte, komprimerat till en storlek som gjorde att den fick plats i handflatan. Det jag inte lyckats gripa tag i på egen hand hade materialiserats och tagit form utan min inblandning. (182)<sup>33</sup>

Through social media, the entanglements of romance, geography, language, and endometriosis are made yet more complex by the strand of the loving, motherly gaze. When Johanna states that the pain of Nora is the only pain that is proportionate to that in her uterus (154), this not only concerns the pain of being inferior to a love rival but also that of being unloved by one's mother. Yet another symbolic layer is added by the fact that endometriosis is a disease where cells resembling cells in the uterus, which in Swedish is called "*livmoder*", literally "life mother", cause pain by spreading to other organs – just like the loving gaze of a mother towards her daughter seeps into every part of Johanna's life, causing unbearable pain.

#### 4. Multilingual Textual Praxis and Readerly Learning Journeys

As the analysis shows, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* deals thematically with questions of love, jealousy, pain, and Scandinavia, and the relationship between the Scandinavian countries and their languages is depicted as fraught with tension. Another layer of significance is added to the text through the friction between what the novel *says* about languages and what it *does* in its linguistic praxis. Indeed, this is an issue that it is always important to be aware of when interpreting literary multilingualism, as it can emphasise, illustrate or enact but also counteract a theme that is developed otherwise in the text (Tidigs 2014, 82).

Time and time again, Johanna speaks of how Scandinavians cannot understand each other, of the failures of communication and the lack of intercomprehension. Simultaneously, the novel is highly multilingual. Sprinkled throughout the text are Danish words and phrases, as well as some instances of Norwegian. Emil's lines of dialogue are rendered in Danish, and the Instagram posts by Nora's mother in Norwegian. Significantly, in addition to this, Danish and Norwegian penetrate the Swedish of the narrator. Johanna tells the reader of Nora's "vänkrets av kjekke norska jenter" (Frid 2018, 34),<sup>34</sup> concludes that "Nora var jag jo simpelthen ikke" (50)<sup>35</sup> and declares "Jeg er ikke redd, sa jag till mig själv med Jens Stoltenberg-röst" (105),<sup>36</sup> just to list a few of numerous examples.

Whereas the narrator-protagonist continually stresses borders and struggles with their collapse, the novel continuously transgresses the borders of Swedish when incorporating other Scandinavian languages mid-sentence. None of the features of Danish or Norwegian are translated into Swedish. Consequently, while repeatedly highlighting the borders and the lack of intercomprehension among Scandinavian languages, the novel simultaneously exposes its readers to Scandinavian languages, presupposing intercomprehension, an effort on the part of the reader to understand or, at least, tolerance of being put in a position of partial fluency.

As such, the novel's linguistic praxis can seem to undermine the image of the relationship between Scandinavian languages that the novel proclaims through its narrator. From another perspective, however, Frid's linguistic choices are highly in tune with the narrative arc of the novel,

<sup>33</sup> Trans.: It was internet love embodied: it contained all that had passed between the mother's eyes and Nora's face, compressed to a size that made it fit in the palm of my hand. What I hadn't been able to grasp on my own had materialised and taken shape without my involvement.

<sup>34</sup> Trans.: Nora's friend group consisting of kjekke [pretty] Norwegian jenter [girls].

<sup>35</sup> Trans.: I simply wasn't Nora. "Simpelthen ikke" is Danish for simply not.

<sup>36</sup> Trans.: I am not afraid, I said to myself in a Jens Stoltenberg voice.

as the untranslated multilingualism of the text enables readers to experience a similar journey of learning to that of the narrator-protagonist. Despite all her struggles, Johanna continues to make efforts with both Danish and Norwegian. Despite Johanna's declarations, the reader learns that she even publishes poems written in Danish (94-95). By composing literature in a non-native tongue, she crosses the border into a space that, within the monolingual paradigm, has been reserved for the first-language speaker (Yildiz 2012, 8-9).

By involving its readers in a learning process similar to that of the protagonist or at least in a process of increasing tolerance for semi-comprehension, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is a prime example of the productive labour that literary multilingualism can invite readers to undertake. Most readers will know more Danish and Norwegian after reading the novel than they did before. By exposing readers to neighbouring languages, the novel not only invites them to learn (elements of) these languages but also, importantly, lets readers "experience" unfamiliarity and semi-comprehension, which brings on a deeper understanding of the novel. Thus, the effect is not only pedagogical but first and foremost literary.

Here, the notion of an ideal, fully linguistically competent reader needs to be abandoned if one is to gain a full picture of what the novel does – thematically and rhetorically. As Kleveland (2020, 93) points out, readers meet the text at different stages in their own language journey and are changed by reading. Consequently, no reading is the same, not even for the same reader. If one decides to re-read *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn*, one's interaction with the Danish and Norwegian features will be different than the last time.

### *Conclusion*

*Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* shows that it can often be that which resides closest to home that is most fraught with tension. This is the case with neighbouring Scandinavian languages, supposedly intercomprehensible yet highly emotionally charged in the novel. On the surface, the novel can seem to perpetuate popular stereotypes surrounding Scandinavian countries and their citizens; however, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, these conceptions are put into intricate play in relation to other aspects of the novel.

As shown, the thematics of painful border troubles extends far beyond Scandinavian countries and languages: to social media, romantic and motherly love, and endometriosis. In fact, I have argued that an "endometriotic poetics" can be said to pervade the novel, where components – whether uterine cells, Nora, Johanna's emotions, or Scandinavian languages – are constantly found spreading across their supposedly "natural" borders into new territories, attaching themselves to new places, resulting in a blending of outer and inner, of private and public, of corporeal and emotional and of geographical and personal. Continuously, borders are shown to be processual events of "bordering" (see Sakai 2008) rather than static lines, where borders are torn down and re-established only to be transgressed once more as the protagonist-narrator simultaneously suffers from the instability of borders and longs for their collapse.

By choosing border dynamics as my entryway to the novel, I have emphasised literary multilingualism as both an integral and multifaceted aspect of the literary text. It is integral in the sense that it is deeply embedded in the meaning production of the text. Literary multilingualism is not a literary device employed simply for the "realistic" depiction of the languages of characters or milieus; it is a highly active component in the thematic structure of the text (see Tidigs 2014, 80-82). Moreover, multilingualism is multifaceted in the sense of not being internally coherent but, conversely, often highly ambivalent. As seen previously, there is a tension between thematic treatment and textual praxis regarding neighbouring

languages. However, this friction is artistically productive as it results in the novel not simply telling its readers of language learning and struggle but letting us experience it. In this way, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* reinforces literature's ability to not only inform or represent but also to *enact* and allow readers to *experience* such crucial questions as those of linguistic and corporeal borders.

The principal part of this article has centred upon pain and struggle. While this is certainly prominent in the novel, love and language learning are, as previously mentioned, also connected. When learning Danish, Johanna also experiences its sensual pleasures: "Vokalerna gled runt i munnen, nya och välsmakande" (Frid 2018, 94).<sup>37</sup> Reflecting upon the joys and hardships of language learning, Johanna, in a typical manner, connects the concrete and the abstract:

Den hösten slog det mig inte att det skulle kunna finnas något romantiskt i att lära sig ett språk för en annan människas skull. Både romantiskt i en slags idealiserad bemärkelse, en fåfång idé om att faktiskt kunna förstå någon annans värld, men också romantiskt på samma sätt som att ge bort blommor eller plocka ur diskmaskinen. Något mycket konkret, samtidigt symboliskt. (10)<sup>38</sup>

At the end of the novel, Johanna learns that Nora has closed her Instagram account, something that undeniably marks a border so that what is private is no longer publicly shared. Meanwhile, Johanna fantasises of completely merging with Nora so that no one would be able to tell them apart. The final line of the novel is deeply ambivalent: "Vid utfarten ur Stockholm pekade alla skyltar mot Oslo" (184).<sup>39</sup> This can be read as Johanna's problems remaining unresolved as the image of Nora/Norway continues to torment her. However, it can also be interpreted as Johanna leaving Stockholm – Swedishness being the symbol of inferiority, brokenness and the lack of love – and getting closer to Oslo: to that which is beautiful, beloved, and whole. Regardless, it is an apt ending that does not erase the complexity and ambivalence of Johanna's struggles, as she travels to Scandinavia, with love – although it is complicated.

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<sup>37</sup> Trans.: The vowels glided around in my mouth, new and delicious.

<sup>38</sup> Trans.: That autumn, it didn't occur to me that there could be something romantic in learning a language for the sake of another human being. Romantic both in some idealised sense, a futile idea of actually being able to understand someone else's world and in the same way as giving flowers or emptying the dish washer is romantic. Something very tangible, yet symbolic.

<sup>39</sup> Trans.: At the exit from Stockholm, all the signs pointed toward Oslo.

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