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In Love with a Cold Climate

Representations of the North in Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing from Scandinavia

ABSTRACT This essay discusses representations of the North in late eighteenth and nineteenth century travel narratives from Scandinavia. It takes as its starting point the traditional conflation of the North with cold that has permeated travellers' views of Scandinavia, and shows how this stereotype persists even when it is contradicted by the actual experience or observations related in northern travelogues. From some examples of the tension between a real and imaginary North in a selection of travelogues, the essay moves on to look at the aesthetics of the northern landscape in terms of the concepts of the sublime and picturesque. It then shows how an idealising aesthetic emphasis is modified in many northern travel narratives by a foregrounding of realistic details that function as markers of an "anti-aesthetics" of the everyday or commonplace, and give readers a sense of the locally specific and specifically northern in descriptions of places, landscapes and human encounters. It concludes with an example that indicates how an acknowledgment of the aesthetic qualities of everyday human activities such as the dried fish trade helps to undermine the stereotype of the cold, barren, desolate and distant north.

KEYWORDS northern travelogues, aesthetics of cold and ice, landscape aesthetics, sublime and picturesque North, imaginary North, realist perspectives on the North

Representations of the North and northern landscapes in travel literature have traditionally been overdetermined by images of cold, barrenness, desolation and remoteness. These qualities though discouraging to some travellers, seem to have been an inducement to others, especially to adventurers wanting liberation from the social pressures connected with the warmth and comforts of the temperate urbanised South. With reference to Scandinavian polar explorers, Annegret Heitmann summarises this sentiment as “Sehnsucht nach der Kälte” (Heitmann 2001: 116–118). Likewise, from an armchair perspective, the romantic poet Robert Southey claimed that reading Mary Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian travelogue had made him “in love with a cold climate & frost & snow” (quoted in Durant (ed.) 1927: 306–307). In short, the North is synonymous with cold.

Through the centuries a yearning for cold has motivated northern travellers and tourists as well as polar explorers, and cold pervades northern travelogues. As Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg point out in the introduction to their appropriately named collection of essays about the cultural meanings of snow and ice, *Cold Matters*: “Winter is overrepresented in the narratives [of the far North] and the summer season seems almost not to exist” (Hansson & Norberg 2009: 8). Wendy Mercer makes a similar point in an essay about the nineteenth-century French travel writer Xavier Marmier, who made two journeys to northern Scandinavia and Svalbard in the late 1830s. She convincingly relates the image of the North as “an area of snow-capped mountains swathed in mist”—that Marmier’s travel narrative *Lettres sur le Nord* from 1840 both echo and reinforce—to early Romanticism (Mercer 2006: 7). In late eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing from Scandinavia, as I will try to show, the conflation of the North with ice and snow, winter and cold was ubiquitous in narratives of northern journeys, even when contradicted in the texts themselves by the actual experience or observations that the author relates. Despite a common emphasis on a cold climate, however, the North that emerges in these narratives is both complex and many-faceted.

But what, exactly, is “the North” in travel literature from Scandinavia? From the perspective of Umeå or Tromsø, some of the (primarily British) travel writers I will discuss hardly went north at all. From the perspective of London, in contrast, *all* of Scandinavia obviously belongs to the North. In other words, what is considered as North is always relative. The North is “a direction” as well as a place, the novelist Margaret Atwood reminded her audience in the opening of her Clarendon Lectures on Canadian literature in 1991, adding that it is also “a place with shifting boundaries” (Atwood 2004: 10). North is often conflated with Arctic, but even that designation is shifting and unstable. Although the Arctic Circle—at approximately 66°

33° N—is still often used to demarcate the Arctic, from a humanist or social science perspective a more generous definition is obviously necessary. In a book titled *The New North* (2012), for example, the American geographer Laurence Smith consequently refers to the 2004 *Arctic Human Development Report* that proposes a redefinition of the Arctic that includes a larger area than the Arctic proper and encompasses the northern territories of the eight Arctic states, including in Fenno-Scandinavia Lapland/Sápmi, although by natural science definitions much of this territory is considered subarctic (Smith 2012: 307). But he himself prefers an even broader definition of the North and includes in what he calls the Northern Rim “all land and oceans lying 45° N latitude or higher held by the United States, Canada, Iceland, Greenland (Denmark), Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia” (Smith 2012: 6–7). Hence he performs an unacknowledged reversal to the classical view—still current around 1800, as Hendriette Kliemann-Geisinger has shown—that the Alps are the borderline between North and South (Kliemann-Geisinger 2007: 79).

With the unstable and presently expanding circumference of the North in mind, it is not surprising that late eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel narratives commonly also incorporate southern parts of the Scandinavian countries (that is, primarily Sweden, Finland and Norway) into an imaginary Arctic. Nor is it surprising that they tend to use as a frame of reference a rather vague concept of a generic and undifferentiated Global North. Clearly, the exact boundaries of the North (or indeed the Arctic) are much less important in northern travel writing than how the North has been culturally defined. Or, as Kliemann-Geisinger puts it: “The North is a spatially flexible construction, the definition of which is dependent on the location, the objective and the interest of the beholder” (Kliemann-Geisinger 2007: 84). My discussion of representations of the Scandinavian North in terms of an aesthetics of cold and ice will take all these factors into account. Of course, the exact location itself matters, as do the travellers’ overall aims and specific personal concerns. Moreover, although travel narratives are by definition factual in the sense of not invented (Youngs 2013: 5), they are also works of literature that tend to rely on imagination as well as facts and observations, and to interpret landscapes in terms of preconceived notions or established aesthetic categories.

Real and Imaginary North

One of the most evocative descriptions in nineteenth-century British travel writing of the “real” Scandinavian North as observed first-hand is found in Lord Dufferin’s best-selling *Letters from High Latitudes* from 1857. The passage, which became a reference point for later Arctic travellers

(Lamont 1876: 287; Conway 1897: 341), describes his arrival in English Bay, in the archipelago of Svalbard, on 6 August the previous year, after an eleven-day crossing from Hammerfest in Northern Norway:

And now, how shall I give you an idea of the wonderful panorama in the midst of which we found ourselves? I think, perhaps, its most striking feature was the stillness—and deadness—and impassibility of this new world: ice, and rock, and water surrounded us; not a sound of any kind interrupted the silence; the sea did not break upon the shore; no bird or any living thing was visible; the midnight sun—by this time muffled in a transparent mist—shed an awful, mysterious lustre on glacier and mountain; no atom of vegetation gave token of the earth's vitality; a universal numbness and dumbness seemed to pervade the solitude. I suppose in scarcely any other part of the world is this appearance of deadness so strikingly exhibited. On the stillest summer day in England there is always perceptible an under-tone of life thrilling through the atmosphere; and though no breeze should stir a single leaf, yet—in default of motion—there is always a sense of growth; but here not so much as a blade of grass was to be seen on the sides of the bald excoriated hills. Primeval rocks—and eternal ice—constitute the landscape. (Dufferin 1867: 192.)

The alien Arctic panorama, for Dufferin, is clearly wonderful in the sense of astonishing rather than aesthetically pleasing. Yet every sentence of his landscape description brings out the aesthetic qualities of a location entirely devoid of anything conventionally associated with scenic beauty. Because his North is defined by cold and stillness, it connotes death. In itself this association is far from unusual in Arctic narratives. William Edward Parry, in one of the earliest accounts of the search for the Northwest Passage, also characterises “the silence which reigned around us” as “the death-like stillness of the most dreary desolation, and the total absence of animated existence” (Parry 1821: 125). Nonetheless, the vivid particulars of Dufferin's austere panorama make it wholly convincing.

However, the kind of Arctic landscape Dufferin saw and described so well also exists as an imaginary context in many travel narratives dealing with other parts of Scandinavia. This North is a discursive formation made up not only of observations like Dufferin's, but also of a tradition of myths and preconceptions. One of the most famous travellers to Scandinavia in the late eighteenth century, the British feminist and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, is representative of this tension between an image of the North and the actual experience of the North. Typically, she chooses to stress “the coldness of the climate” even when recording her arrival (in pleasant weather, as she also notes) in Bohuslän on the Swedish west coast around midsummer 1795 (Wollstonecraft 1989: 246). Throughout the epis-

tolary travelogue she published the following year under the title *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway*, she refers to winter and cold as the *norm* that informs both her expectations and her actual experiences of Scandinavia: “The current of life seemed congealed at the source,” she writes when approaching the Norwegian border in July; “all were not frozen; for it was summer [...]; but every thing appeared so dull, that I waited to see ice, in order to reconcile me to the absence of gaiety” (Wollstonecraft 1989: 262–263). At the same time, Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*—like all the best northern travel narratives—goes beyond such totalising stereotypes. Although she has expected to see snow and ice, she never does. She looks in vain for the mountains “capped with eternal snow” described in the travel account of her most important recent predecessor in Scandinavia, William Coxe (Coxe 1802: 25): “they had flown,” she notes ironically (Wollstonecraft 1989: 304). Instead her observations of Nordic landscapes inspire her to a different kind of aesthetic discourse, one in which attention to details coexists with a personally motivated political critique that turns everything that grows in often seemingly barren soil—from tiny wild pansies to pine trees “loaded with ripening seeds” (Wollstonecraft 1989: 310)—into images of her own struggles, “occasioned,” as she puts it, “by the oppressed state of my sex” (Wollstonecraft 1989: 325). In Wollstonecraft’s case, then, particular observations and their personal significance undermine her images of a generic North defined by a cold climate.

The imaginary North evoked in travel writing from the late eighteenth century onwards depends so much on notions of a cold climate and its determining effects on landscapes and culture that some travellers seem reluctant to accept the fact of northern summer even when that is what they have experienced. One amusing example is the opening chapter of another British travel narrative published a century after Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*, Ethel Tweedie’s *Through Finland in Carts* from 1897, where the account of the author’s arrival in the Helsinki harbour on a brilliantly sunny June day is illustrated with a photo of her ship in winter, entirely covered in ice and snow (Fig. 1). Helsinki, according to Tweedie, is “essentially a winter town” (Tweedie 1897: 23), and it is clearly this *essence* rather than the city’s accidental appearance on one particular summer day that her choice of illustration reflects. In her previous travel narrative, *A Winter Jaunt to Norway* (1894), Tweedie—who launched a prolific travel writing career with books about Scandinavia—had argued that the successful adaptation of the Norwegians to long cold winters had produced a specific kind of national culture best exemplified by skiing, which she describes as a necessity in terms of mobility, a sport and an art form. When well done, she explains, “skilöbning is the very poetry of motion” (Tweedie 1894: 41). Convinced that Finland, too, is a



Fig. 1. "Our Ship in Winter." Illustration in Ethel Tweedie, *Through Finland in Carts* (1897).

country by nature "ice-bound" and culturally defined by winter, she clearly finds it difficult to assimilate the "almost tropical vegetation" that she actually observes in Helsinki: "the summer bursts forth in such luxuriance," she writes, "that the flowers verily seem to have been only waiting under the snow to raise their heads" (Tweedie 1897: 22–23).

In the Svalbard archipelago, located between the 74° and 81° N latitudes, summers are also temperate due to the influence of the North Atlantic Current. The British art historian and mountaineer Sir Martin Conway remarks upon this in his account of a month-long climbing expedition in the interior of the main island, *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897). Here he repeatedly compares the Svalbard climate to that of England, describing the light on one day as "pale and feeble, like that of a cloudy English afternoon in December" (Conway 1897: 72), on another as "brilliantly clear [like] an English May day" (Conway 1897: 122). In general he finds that "Spitsbergen weather in these summer months is very English—the same soft, damp air, the same fickleness and unreliability, the same occasional perfection" (Conway 1897: 213–214). He goes so far as to speculate that England "in a climatic sense" may be said to belong to the polar region: "The Arctic Circle ought to be drawn through the Straits of Dover" (Conway 1897: 214). Although Conway is aware that Svalbard as a *Terra nullius* has been explored and exploited by people from many different nations since its discovery by the Dutch in 1596, his conflation of the English and Arctic climates serves to



Fig. 2. "Winterers' Sloop Frozen up in Advent Bay." Frontispiece in Sir William Martin Conway, *First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897).

naturalise British imperial presence in the archipelago. But, like Wollstonecraft and Tweedie, Conway implies that his own experiences are somewhat anomalous by situating them in a context of ice and snow. Represented in his narrative primarily by the illustrations, many of which depict icefields, glaciers and snowcapped mountains, this context provides a background of peril against which the events he records can be measured.¹

The frontispiece of Conway's *First Crossing of Spitsbergen* bears an intriguing resemblance to Tweedie's photo of an ice-covered ship. It is a watercolour showing a small boat without sails in a bay full of ice floes (Fig. 2). Neither the picture itself nor the caption "Winterers' Sloop Frozen up in Advent Bay" seems to have any connection with the narrative of an overland expedition, and only makes sense in terms of an episode some fifty pages into the text. It describes a delay caused by ice, which prevents the ship carrying Conway and his companions from proceeding through the Ice Fjord (*Isfjorden*) to Advent Bay, where they plan to start their journey. Even as late as the middle of June ships may be trapped and destroyed. A physical reminder of potential risk then appears in the form of two men taken on board from a small boat. They are the survivors of a party of four Norwegian reindeer hunters who had been forced by ice to spend the winter in Svalbard, first in their boat, which was later crushed by the ice, then in a makeshift hut. Two of the men have succumbed to scurvy and one is still recovering. "They had a horrible tale to tell of privation, sickness, and death," Conway comments

before recapitulating it in the form of a long inserted narrative based (as his notebook shows) on detailed notes taken at the time (Conway 1897: 55–58). After landing near Advent Point, the survivors show Conway “their poor little vessel [...], firmly fixed in the ice and full of water,” their hut and, nearby, two barrels covered with a sail that contain the body of their dead skipper, the frozen ground having made it impossible to bury him (Conway 1897: 59). On the last evening in Svalbard Conway revisits this site to look at “the winterer’s grave and the ruins of his hut” and is struck by the “settled melancholy [that] pervaded the silent scene” (Conway 1897: 316). Hence, although Conway’s expedition takes place during the temperate summer season, the story of the winterers’ disaster resonates throughout his narrative. It creates a sense of impending doom that is reinforced by two photos—one of the miserable survivors beside their hut, the other of the skipper’s “tomb” (Figs. 3 and 4)—and also by an incident preceding the encounter with the survivors, when Conway is by himself, confused, hungry and lost and beginning to think about the delusions of “marooned mariners” and “the strain of Arctic solitude” (Conway 1897: 51).

In 1857 Lord Dufferin had warned prospective tourists that winters in Svalbard are “unendurable” (Dufferin 1867: 201). This is confirmed in Conway’s narrative by the tale of the survivors, and their account of cold and deprivation was certainly “real.” So, of course, was the chance that a ship



Fig. 3. “The Survivors and Their Hut.” Illustration in Sir William Martin Conway, *First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897).

might freeze over in the Helsinki harbour during the winter. In other words, the frozen North highlighted by Tweedie and Conway in their strategically placed illustrations cannot itself be called imaginary, except in the sense that it had not been part of their own experiences of summers in Svalbard or Finland. The wintery conditions depicted therefore reveal more about the expectations they must have shared with their readers than the reality they purport to convey.

Sublime and Picturesque North

Conway's picture of the deserted sloop and Tweedie's of the ice-encrusted ship are both reminders of what Chauncey Loomis has called the *Arctic Sublime*. Although not in themselves particularly grand or awe-inspiring, the images do suggest the insignificance of human presence in "the cold vastness and indifferent powers of the inorganic cosmos" characteristic of sublimity in its Arctic form (Loomis 1977: 104). As the most influential theorist of the sublime, Edmund Burke, makes clear, the sublime is an *affective* category that causes a sense of terror and awe in the beholder, and intimations of such emotions are ever-present in northern travelogues. A representative example is the account in Conway's second Svalbard narrative, *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers*, of skiing with a companion on a Spitsbergen glacier under the midnight sun and experiencing "a sense of



Fig. 4. "The Tomb of the Skipper." Illustration in Sir William Martin Conway, *First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897).

boundless space, a feeling of freedom, a joy as in the ownership of the whole universe" (Conway 1898: 47). Another is Wollstonecraft's first encounter with a coastal landscape of "huge, dark rocks, that looked like the rude material of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space" on her arrival in Sweden (Wollstonecraft 1989: 245). However, the iconic spot for experiences of the sublime in narratives of Scandinavia is the North Cape plateau, "a scene of desolation" according to the Italian travel writer Giuseppe Acerbi, who arrived at that "extremest point of Europe" at midnight on a journey through Lapland in the summer of 1799:

The northern sun, creeping at midnight at the distance of five diameters along the horizon, and the immeasurable ocean in apparent contact with the skies, form the grand outlines in the sublime picture presented to the astonished spectator. The incessant cares and pursuits of anxious mortals are recollected as in a dream; the various forms and energies of animated nature are forgotten; the earth contemplated only in its elements, and as constituting a part of the solar system. (Acerbi 1802: 110–111.)

Many eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of Scandinavian journeys culminate on this cliff, with descriptions of vistas similarly representing infinity—the "truest test of the sublime" according to Burke, because it "has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is [its] most genuine effect" (Burke 1968: 73).

In their encounters with the sublime vastness of the Arctic Ocean, northern travellers are elevated by being able to encompass in one view the whole universe. Acerbi is a case in point. But above all they are humbled by a power much greater than themselves. As Xavier Marmier eloquently puts it in *Lettres sur le Nord* (in Wendy Mercer's translation):

Before us, the Polar Sea, the sea without bounds and without end [...] and the idea of the distant solitude where we found ourselves, the appearance of this island in a far-flung corner of the world, the wild cry of the seagull mixing with the sighs of the breeze, the roar of the waves, all the angles from which this strange country could be viewed, and all these plaintive voices of the desert caused us to be struck by a kind of stupour which we were unable to overcome. [...] Elsewhere, nature can delight the soul through the contemplation of its magnificent beauties; here, nature seizes and subjugates the onlooker. Before such a scene, one feels small, one bows the head in one's weakness, and if a few words then escape the lips, these can only be an expression of humility and prayer. (Quoted in Mercer 2006: 6.)

Conway's exuberant "sense of boundless space" on the Svalbard glacier is a positive version of this sentiment. But usually, as in Marimer's case, the

sublime North “seizes and subjugates,” filling the traveller with awe.

At the same time, northern travel narratives throughout the nineteenth century adhere to aesthetic ideals and habits of viewing rooted in the compositional principles of landscape paintings and—particularly in the case of British travel writers—in the ideals of beauty inherited from William Gilpin’s notions of “the Picturesque.” In a series of so-called “picturesque tours,” the first of which—*Observations on the River Wye*—was published in 1782, Gilpin established the practice of examining natural scenes from specified viewpoints—prospects—as “a new object of pursuit” for the leisured traveller (Gilpin 1782: 1). The “picturesque eye,” according to Gilpin, is continually “in quest of beauty” (Gilpin 1782: 15), and the aesthetic discernment that this quest involves was also a sign of taste. Mary Wollstonecraft’s observations of the delicate beauty of vegetation growing in rocky northern soil (which I have already mentioned) are allied to picturesque aesthetics, which tended to emphasise the value of unregulated nature in contrast to the cultivated, regular and humanised landscapes preferred by classical landscape painters. During the nineteenth century, however, there are signs in many Scandinavian travel narratives of a distinctively northern or Arctic version of the picturesque. Hence, when Sir James Lamont describes entering English Bay in Svalbard in 1876, he notes that Lord Dufferin (presumably in “the wonderful panorama” quoted above) has perfectly represented its “picturesque character” (Lamont 1876: 287). Unlike Gilpin, who consistently prefers rocks “richly adorned with wood” (Gilpin 1782: 113), Lamont finds even the most austere mountain landscapes beautiful.

Conway, too, highlights the beauty of English Bay “so well described by Lord Dufferin” (Conway 1897: 341). As an art historian he is particularly attentive to the northern picturesque. In his role of expedition surveyor on both his Svalbard ventures, he puts up his plane table whenever physical conditions and weather permit, but accounts of views that serve topographical purposes often merge into word-paintings clearly aimed at suggesting a more subjective, poetic or pictorial, vision of the Arctic landscape. Their explicit purpose is to give readers unfamiliar with the Arctic a sense of “its splendour” (Conway 1898: 9). The shape of the mountain formations fascinates him, as does the effect of varying light and weather conditions. But the main aim of his word-paintings is to register the many colours of a landscape many would dismiss as bleak and inhospitable. Rocks are “gaudy with flaming colour” (Conway 1898: 65), valleys are “deep blue cloud-enveloped” (Conway 1897: 109), remote hills are “indigo, patched with orange, gold and pink” (Conway 1898: 48), a prospect is memorable because of “the gravity of the colouring, the dark-green sea, the purple rocks, the blue glacier cliff, the near grey, the remote yellowish snow” (Conway 1897: 285)—to cite only

a few examples. Even the snowfields are colourful. “What struck us most was the colours,” he comments about the view from the middle of the three mountains known as the Crowns. “The desert of snow was bluish or purplish-grey; only the sea mist [...] was pure white” (Conway 1898: 120–121).

Particularly in *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers*, Conway’s narrative of his second expedition, during which he had better weather than on the first, he consistently counters “the rather colourless stereotype of the Arctic” that, as Robert G. David has argued, persisted throughout the nineteenth century (David 2000: 39). Conway’s representation of a colourful Arctic endows it with a picturesque quality that must have challenged popular perceptions of cold desolation. Not surprisingly, one purpose of this most enthusiastic of his two Svalbard travelogues is to convince his readers that the most accessible parts of the Arctic, though in many ways forbidding, in others surpasses even the Alps in natural beauty and therefore “seems to be intended by Nature for the arctic ‘Playground of Europe’” (Conway 1898: 73).

Everyday North

The emphasis on the aesthetics of landscape in northern travel narratives is frequently modified by the foregrounding of details that function as markers of the everyday, the mimetic and the incidental. Such details challenge the notion of a generic or undifferentiated North, defined by a cold climate, because they are used to capture both the locally specific and the specifically northern in descriptions of places, landscapes and human encounters. The North evoked by striking details is many-faceted, particularised and therefore memorable. As even the arbiter of eighteenth-century idealist aesthetics, Sir Joshua Reynolds, acknowledges in his *Discourses on Art*, “some circumstances of minuteness and particularity frequently tend to give an air of truth to a piece, and to interest the spectator in an extraordinary manner” (quoted in Schor 1987: 22). This is close to what Peter Brooks calls the “thing-ism” of a realist perspective (Brooks 2005: 16). While Brooks is certainly correct in arguing that “realism is almost by definition visual,” as is the aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque, an attention to material facts or everyday details in northern travel writing often involves one or more of the other four senses too, smell and taste in particular.

Such everyday details are sometimes commonplace. Yet the representation of Swedish Lapland as experienced during the summer of 1799 by the British naturalist Edward Daniel Clarke—to give one example—would have been much tamer and less interesting without his vivid descriptions of assaults by thick clouds of mosquitoes “clamorous for their pray” (Clarke 1824, 9: 414). Even more memorable are his evocations, in nauseous detail, of the

unpalatable local diet consisting “only of biscuit made of the inner bark of the birch-tree, chopped straw, and a little rye,” washed down with sour fermented milk, a drink he names “*Lapland* nectar; a revolting slime, ‘*corrupted*,’ as *Tacitus* said of *beer*, ‘into a semblance of *wine*’” (Clarke 1824, 9: 400–401). Ill through most of his journey and only able to continue because the lack of roads make travel by boat along the rivers necessary, Clarke describes himself as getting close to death when both his health and appetite are miraculously restored after he has eaten delicious local cloudberries. Although the same fruit is found in the north of England, he does not believe that it there

ever attains the same degree of maturity and perfection [...] as in *Lapland*, where the sun acts with such power during the summer. Its medicinal properties have certainly been overlooked, owing, perhaps, either to this circumstance, or to its rarity in *Great Britain*. (Clarke 1824, 9: 371–372.)

While aesthetic pleasure is conventionally set apart from other, more immediate or sensual, kinds of pleasure, Clarke’s cure makes him connect the delight of observing picturesque “morasses [...] covered by [...] plump and fair berries” with his own body and its requirements (Clarke 1824, 9: 524). Attention to details, in this case, imbeds aesthetics in the experience of everyday life.

In her important study of eighteenth-century women travel writers and the language of aesthetics, Elizabeth Bohls makes a similar point in her discussion of what she calls Wollstonecraft’s “anti-aesthetics.” She shows how Wollstonecraft in her Scandinavian travel narrative, like Clarke in his, uses details to “attack the autonomy of the aesthetic domain, or the segregation of aesthetic from practical” by challenging the anti-utilitarian bias of the picturesque prospect. Gilpin, that is to say, argues that signs of human industry spoil the pleasure of picturesque scenes, and Wollstonecraft does not agree. One of Bohls’ examples of Wollstonecraft’s subversion of Gilpin’s picturesque opens according to convention but ends, as Bohls puts it, “in playful unorthodoxy” (Bohls 1995: 151). The scene described is near Kvistrum in Bohuslän:

Advancing towards Quistram, as the sun was beginning to decline, I was particularly impressed by the beauty of the situation. The road was on the declivity of a rocky mountain, slightly covered with a mossy herbage and vagrant firs. At the bottom, a river, straggling amongst the recesses of stone, was hastening forward to the ocean and its grey rocks, of which we had a prospect on the left, whilst on the right it stole peacefully forward into the meadows, losing itself in a thickly wooded rising

ground. As we drew near, the loveliest banks of wild flowers variegated the prospect, and promised to exhale odours to add to the sweetness of the air, the purity of which you could almost see, alas! not smell, for the putrifying herrings, which they use as manure, after the oil has been extracted, spread over the patches of earth, claimed by cultivation, destroyed every other. (Wollstonecraft 1989: 261.)

As Bohls points out, Wollstonecraft in this passage establishes a standard picturesque prospect “to build the aesthetized impression that she then wickedly undercuts with the incongruous stench of rotten fish, signifiers of practical agricultural activity.” At the same time, her emphasis on the *smell* “undercuts the primacy of the visual. The homely realism of the putrid herrings points out the artifice of an aesthetics that guards against life’s bad smells” (Bohls 1995: 151). From the perspective on northern travel, one may add that this reference to herrings used as manure is one of the realistic details in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* that makes this specific area of the North come alive for her readers.

It is probably no coincidence that the realism of northern travel writing is expressed through homely, sometimes even offensive, details. Realist fiction works in the same way and privileges what Brooks calls the “non-beautiful” or, as he immediately rephrases it, “the interest, possibly the beauty, of the non-beautiful” (Brooks 2005: 8). Martin Conway’s description of his visit to the winterers’ hut in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* finds dignity, if not beauty, in what he observes there:

The hut was neatly built, dug out of the ground about a yard deep, and with trim steps leading down to it. The end was formed of wood admirably joined, and with a door that shut closely and locked. There were some small glass windows, and a fireplace with an iron-pipe chimney. These things were brought from the ship. Within all was perfectly tidy—a bed along one side, various utensils, all clean and proper. The seamen’s chests were ranged on one side, and on each was a label praying the finder, “for pity’s sake,” to send it to the owner’s wife at such a place. (Conway 1897: 60.)

The ordinariness of this primitive but snug little hut makes it more poignant. Among its meagre contents only the labels on the seamen’s chests recall the survivors’ harrowing story of the skipper dying there some two months previously. In Conway’s text the hut and the precarious domesticity it represents, stand out as an incongruous element in the Arctic wilderness. Like Wollstonecraft’s “putrifying herrings” and Clarke’s “plump and fair berries,” Conway’s “perfectly tidy” hut interior is evidence of an everyday life that is both distinctive to a particular area and, in some ways, universal. Hence, it creates an emphatic connection between traveller and locals (if such a term

can be applied to winterers in Svalbard) that brings readers, too, closer to the actual North.

Commercial North

The winterers in Conway's narrative are in it for the money. As the survivors more or less admit, their disaster was caused by greed. Had they sailed from Advent Bay earlier instead of hunting until the middle of October to fill up their boat with more reindeer, they might have avoided being caught by the pack ice. Conway does not comment on the activities of the winterers, but in the introduction to *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* he laments the ruthless and unbridled exploitation of the Svalbard archipelago's natural resources by whalers, trappers, hunters and fishermen of many different nations. "Unfortunately it continues to be a no-man's land, annexed by no state and governed by no laws," he writes. "Fisheries are unregulated; there is no close time for bird or beast, and so the animal depopulation threatens to become complete" (Conway 1897: 5). However, other nineteenth century travelogues deal more explicitly with the commercial North. The following passage, from Cutcliffe Hyne's *Through Arctic Lapland* (1898), a narrative of a romp from the Varanger Fjord to the Gulf of Bothnia, is a good example. Its telling details situate the Norwegian town of Vardø firmly on the map of international trade:

The sea is the only field which yields the Vardö man a harvest, and from the sea he reaps it with unremitting industry. Finns, Russians, Norwegians, Samoyedes, Lapps, all join in the work and bring their catch, in clumsy yots, and square-sailed viking boats, and the other weird unhandy craft of the North, in past the concrete wall of Vardö harbour, and run alongside the smelling warehouses which are built on piles at the water-side, and send it ashore all slimy and glistening, and then go off to dangle bait in the chill inhospitable seas for more.

The men of the town, and the women, gut the fish, and leave the entrails to rot in the streets, or under the wharfs, or in the harbour water; and then the carcasses are carried to the outskirts of the town, and hung on endless racks of wood to shrivel, and dry, and scent the air as thoroughly as the rains of the climate will permit. At the corner posts hang posies of cods' heads to serve as fodder for the cows and goats during the winter, and these too help to amplify the stink. And from the mainland, beyond the fort, when the breezes blow Vardö-wards, there drift across more forceful stinks from the factory where they flense the Finner whales, and try down the blubber into oil, and cut up the pink beef for canned meats and fodder for the Arctic cow.

In the harbour, steamers from France, and Hamburg, and lower Norway load bales of dried cod, which will carry the aroma of Vardö as far as Bremen, Brest, and St Petersburg. (Hyne 1898: 8–9.)

Again, as in Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, we are dealing with an "anti-aesthetics" that uses the immersion of the narrator in the scene to foreground bad smells. But, in northern travel, Hyne suggests, details such as "posies of cods' heads" may be more notable aesthetic features of the local scene than idealising sublime vistas or conventional picturesque prospects. More importantly, the passage shows that it is only by its full acknowledgment of the aesthetic qualities of everyday human activity that northern travel writing can hope to challenge the—still persistent—stereotypes of the cold, barren, desolate and alien North.

NOTES

- ¹ Heidi Hansson makes a similar point in a discussion of "the interaction between text and illustrations" in Lord Dufferin's *Letters from High Latitudes* (Hansson 2009: 68).

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