

The Arctic North

Multigeneric Narratives and the Case of Nansen's Farthest North

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“The North” is, quite understandably, a frustratingly ambiguous and flexible concept. After all, it has without further ado adopted a cardinal point, just like the South, the West or the East, expecting to make sense, literally in all directions. In any historical or geographical discourse, however, “the North” may mean at least two rather different things: it may, on the one hand, denote the circumpolar region above the Arctic Circle, which is variously called the Polar North, the High North or the Arctic North. On the other hand, it may encompass the much broader area of Northern Europe, which also includes, in historical terms, the whole cultural world that develops after the Reformation, as a more or less deliberate Protestant alternative to the Catholic culture of the Mediterranean region. In the present article, however, the focus will be on the former, which for convenience’ sake I will label as the Arctic North.

With that distinction drawn, and as a background to the ensuing reading of a specific text, namely Fridtjof Nansen’s *Farthest North* (1897), I would like, first, to make some fundamental observations on the variety of perspectives that this world brings us into contact with, together with the astonishing degree of cross-disciplinarity that this topic represents, and that also manifests itself in an amazing array of literary genres. These include travelogues, expedition reports, scientific treatises, maps, fiction, poetry, children’s literature, religious and edifying literature, art, music, panoramas, dioramas etc.¹

Second, the following discussion will partly take its departure from a question that will most likely preoccupy anyone taking an interest in the polar regions: Why has there been such an obsession with this frozen region for so long? In attempting to answer this rather overwhelming question,

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¹ For a discussion of the latter two phenomena, see Potter 2007.

one may, perhaps surprisingly, find a useful starting point in a term that has become common currency, almost fashionable, in recent years, namely “anthropocentrism.” In our fascination with the North, we tend perhaps to forget that we are constantly focusing on *our* dreams, man’s dreams, as if we are incapable of imagining anything without placing ourselves in the centre. In Caspar Friedrich’s iconic painting *The Wanderer above the Mists* (1818), the dark, enigmatic figure, with his back turned to us, has an immensely powerful presence in the picture, and he is clearly entering, or trying to enter, into some kind of communion with the landscape in front of him. But at the same time, there is something melancholic about the scene, as if the distant mountains are somehow out of reach and beyond him. Similarly, we are continuously placing the North in the category of “the Other,” that is something unapproachable and sufficient in itself, which is very decidedly not us. Nevertheless, we tend to perceive this voiceless Other as something that can only acquire a voice, and thus meaning, through man himself, as if we are unwilling to accept its self-sufficiency or its potential wish to be left alone.

This anthropocentrism is, admittedly, not unique to this particular topic, but something tells me there is an even sharper focus on the way the Arctic North is centred on man’s experience, man’s exploitation, and man’s struggle against nature than for instance the more accommodating South, and it therefore comes to epitomise, from the Renaissance onwards, what appears to be man’s unquenchable thirst for a conquest of nature, and preferably nature in its fiercest and most hostile and resistant form. It is as if the Arctic represents nature’s last stance as a completely free and truly independent space, and for precisely that reason it also becomes all the more attractive as one of the very last and most extreme of man’s geographical conquests. This creates an interesting paradox, because traditionally we think of this space, which puts man to his severest test, as precisely a space which is not only voiceless, but also empty of people, as a no-man’s land, or as—somehow—pure, humanless nature.

But that of course is not true, and we realize that this is yet another indication not just of anthropocentrism in general, but even of a selective and one-sided kind of anthropocentrism: we tend to forget that this space is actually populated, however sparsely, by “other” ethnic groups that we have also tended to overlook or ignore, for the simple reason that they are not white, Christian western Europeans. Thus, the “narrative perspectives” of these “others,” too, have been largely ignored. The North contains, in other words, a certain silently ignored postcolonial dimension as well. Perhaps our stereotypical insistence on the North as an empty and uninhabited world is even a subconscious excuse for not having to address it as a postcolonial space that raises uncomfortable questions about white western man’s perception of it.

Another way of putting it is that the North, for the reasons mentioned, also becomes the supreme showroom of human *hubris*. It is, in other words, the place where man shows a particularly unpalatable or unappealing side to

himself. In the North, man demonstrates once and for all that he is simply not willing to accept limitations on what he can do. On the contrary, the Arctic North is the place where man intends to show that he can both literally and figuratively conquer new ground, where he can do the impossible, and survive the impossible. Therefore, it is perhaps also no surprise that, as will be discussed later, this conquest takes the form of the exertion of a fundamentally male power over a feminine *terra incognita*, a conquest constantly verging on abuse and violence. Furthermore, it comes to epitomize with unpleasant sharpness the situation we find ourselves in right now with regard to climate change and environmental degradation.

Let us consider, however, what might be regarded as the two main traditional, and rather stereotypical, dimensions of the Arctic North. On the one hand, there is the natural, concrete, geographical space, which is dominated by such obvious natural features as sea, ice, snow, cold, emptiness, whales, polar bears etc., that is a space or playground that exists—or rather existed— independently of any human presence. It could be argued perhaps that the literature on this particular aspect of the North is by far the most comprehensive, primarily in the form of a massive amount of expedition accounts and scientific reports on wildlife, natural resources and the arctic natural scene in general, all of which amounted to man's background efforts in order to enable himself to exploit it for his own use. On the other hand, there is the abstract cultural and historical space, which in the western consciousness has been brought to us by the Vikings, the sagas etc., and in later years by studies on man's perceptions of the Arctic North, whose main focus has been on the ways in which it has impacted on our mindset, its role in the cultures of particular nations etc. Examples of such studies are Barry Lopez' *Arctic Dreams* (1986), Robert G. David's *The Arctic in the British Imagination 1818–1914* (2000), Sherill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North* (2002) and Peter Davidson's *The Idea of North* (2005).

It seems that these two main dimensions form the foundation for the perception from which the many stories of the North take their narrative perspectives. Sometimes these narratives encompass both of these dimensions, sometimes only one, but at the core of both of them is the fundamental idea of the Arctic North as a stage consisting of an untouched, sublime natural scenery.

These two main dimensions may, however, be expanded into further subcategories that have an impact on the various narratives from the region:

First, the North is a commercial and industrial playground, represented by a search over several centuries for the North Pole and the Northwest and the Northeast Passages, and by the continuous struggle to exploit natural resources in the form of mining, whaling, fishing and hunting. Finding a passage to the Pacific and the markets of the Far East, either to the north of Canada or to the north of Russia, was a wet dream for the countries in northern Europe for centuries, and especially after the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) between Spain and Portugal, which made the recently discovered route via Cape of Good Hope

virtually inaccessible. This search for a navigable northern route was to prove one of the most time -and resource-consuming enterprises in terms of exploration, and would eventually take half a millennium to complete. As to mining, the first large-scale industrial effort was probably that of Martin Frobisher, who in the 1570s, and with Queen Elizabeth's blessing, transported 1,200 tons of ore, believed to be full of gold, from near Baffin Island to England. Though a spectacular failure, Frobisher's third and final expedition still remains the biggest ever to the Arctic, including fifteen ships (see McGhee 2005: ch. 8). A more profitable enterprise was the Dutch whaling adventure in Smeerenburg at the north-western tip of Spitsbergen in the early 1600s, where, for a pre-industrial period, enormous amounts of blubber were produced over a period of a few decades, enough to seriously reduce the population of bowhead whales and seals in the area. In addition, spectacular amounts of fur from Russia as well as present-day Canada were each year sold at auctions in Europe. While the region was subjected to an often brutal harvesting of renewable natural resources, however, the non-renewable resources were generally too difficult to extract, and it is only now, with the actual opening up of the Northeast Passage (made possible by climate change), the finding of oil and gas, and a race among the superpowers to mine the Arctic seabed for minerals, that these old dreams of large-scale industrial activity are being realised, unless protective measures will prevent it.

Second, the North has always been, and still is, a military playground. With the promise that the Northwest and Northeast Passages might reduce the length of the shipping lanes between the Atlantic and the Pacific to as little as a third of the distance, both Britain and Russia in particular realised, from the 1500s onwards, the strategic importance of the region, and spent significant resources securing control of the western and eastern sea routes, respectively. In Britain, the responsibility for this century-long exploration was firmly and significantly placed with the Navy (see David Loades in Hill (ed.) 1995: ch. 2). Later on, other powers have cast their eyes on the region for similar reasons. It is not surprising, therefore, that a country like China, which is not historically associated with the Arctic, is showing a very active interest, and the presence, mentioned above, of enormous natural resources in the region itself makes it self-evident that especially the major powers want to ensure their influence. Large tracts of the Arctic are not controlled by international treaties, and thus the constant patrolling of Russian and American submarines under the ice sheet, and such events as the planting of the Russian flag on the bottom of the ocean under the North Pole in 2007, are clearly designed to underline strategic and military interests.

Third, the North is a political playground, with plans over the centuries for extensive colonisation and settlements, from those of Martin Frobisher in the 1500s, via the writings of Arthur Dobbs in the 1740s, which envisaged a group of almost utopian urban clusters around Hudson's Bay (Fjågesund 2014: 127-130), to Josef Stalin's megalomaniac and now largely forgotten ambition

in the 1930s of bringing civilisation—and the Revolution—to the northern tundra in the form of towns and trading centres along the so-called Northern Sea Route (see McCannon 1998), not unlike the network of stations along the Congo River in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Such efforts were obviously designed to monopolise the national presence in the region, thereby establishing footholds to justify later claims to sovereignty.

At the same time, however, it was also in many ways and over several centuries an essentially apolitical sphere, in the sense of being a no-man's land owned by nobody and everyone. Thus, there is also something fundamentally free and democratic about it—a sphere disconnected from traditional power structures, and a new Frontier for anyone to try their hands on, not unlike the Wild West in nineteenth-century America. This may partly explain why such a small nation as Norway became a major contributor to Arctic exploration.

This ambiguous status is also relevant to a fourth dimension, namely that of the North as a scientific playground, which has been the case for centuries. Because of the region's extreme natural conditions, and because national borders have largely been non-existent, not least due to the fact that large tracts were for so long uncharted, it has been a convenient testing ground for new instruments and equipment, and a field for scientific research. It is almost difficult to find an expedition report that does not present itself largely, or even primarily, as scientifically motivated. It is more than obvious, however, that the large majority of these expeditions have been using science as a legitimising pretext for what were far more frequently commercial, political or military considerations, or simply a wish to fulfil personal ambitions. A representative example is Captain Constantine Phipps's expedition to Spitsbergen in 1773, which demonstrated an impressive array of new scientific equipment, and which largely introduced a scientific discourse in its report from the voyage, but whose primary aim was still very obviously to find the simplest route of all to the Pacific, namely that straight across the Pole (see Fjågesund 2008). Today, of course, there is an enormous scientific activity in the entire region, centred around environmental and climate issues as well as renewable and non-renewable resources, which does not mean that there are not also other major interests behind these apparently irreproachable efforts.

But as suggested, this Arctic North also has a spiritual or immaterial dimension, which could be categorised further:

It is a mythical, mythological and supernatural playground, which has inspired European culture for centuries. It is not surprising at all that this universe, with an endless supply of natural wonders, has produced ideas of a more numinous character. Even the ancient Greeks, safely tucked away in the south-eastern corner of the Mediterranean, had dramatic notions, attractive as well as frightening, of Ultima Thule and Hyperborea, that is the unknown world to the far north, and Norse mythology, for more obvious reasons, made active use of the polar landscape as part of its mythological geography. Later, these ideas have also inspired a wide array of popular spin-offs in the form of

fantastic literature, video games and even music of the black metal genre (see for instance Barraclough et al. (eds.) 2016 and O'Donoghue 2007).

One may further speculate as to what extent the North also carries a specifically religious dimension, or whether it is precisely an areligious world, for the simple reason that religion presupposes civilisation, while the Arctic North is rather popularly perceived as everything that civilisation is not—like the world on the fifth day of creation, before man came into being. Is it even a place where we could see God as conspicuously absent—a place, so to speak, waiting for Godot? Whether explicitly religious or not, the fact remains that a considerable body of edifying literature, especially for young people, was set in the Arctic, providing a suitably dramatic context for moral choices of potentially fatal consequences (see Fjågesund 2014: 360-375).

Despite its perceived lack of people, the Arctic North is also surrounded by a considerable body of history, from Greek Antiquity onwards. What characterises this history, however, is that it has tended to be presented as a separate historical current, focused rather one-sidedly on the specific region in question, with the result that it has usually been seen as more or less isolated from the broader movements of political, cultural and colonial history.²

But perhaps most importantly, at least for the present context, the North is very much an imaginative, aesthetic and artistic playground, which has produced an endless amount of travel writing, fiction, sagas, poetry, paintings, music etc., which have been inspired by this strange and remote world, and which have celebrated the encounters of thousands of individuals with it, resulting in stories of heroism and cowardice, moral edification, victory and loss, that is all the highs and lows man is capable of. It is a virgin and sublime territory, which is basically beyond everything that is familiar, and perhaps even more of an Underworld, as it must have been for countless explorers, than Joseph Conrad's African heart of darkness; after all, the jungle almost comes across as a civilised Garden of Eden by comparison with the Arctic North in its full-blown, icy fury. If one were to suggest one writer who might serve as a representative of this imaginative universe, it would probably have to be Jack London, whose writings, with their foregrounding of animals as powerful, free-standing characters, could even be seen as a tentative questioning or undermining of an otherwise firmly established anthropocentrism.

In addition to the aspects of the Arctic North mentioned above, it might also be observed that many of the stereotyped qualities traditionally associated with this region are very much compatible with our modern fascination with outer space and other planets. The wild, treeless and windblown icy wastes carry striking similarities to the equally empty and desolate lunar or Martian landscapes. Furthermore, it represents a frontier and an unknown, which is either unpopulated or is populated by somebody fundamentally “other” or

² The attempt to see them under one lens was the overriding ambition of my book *The Dream of the North* (2014).

“alien”.³ And until this space has been explored and brought under human (that is western European!) control in yet another conquest of virgin territory, it remains a kind of “free” space for the imagination and for exploration, just like those remote landscapes in outer space, where man will only be able to survive against extreme odds.

When it comes to what consequences the above aspects of the Arctic have for the narrative forms of the literature from the North, there are plenty of examples of conventional forms, such as for instance purely scientific accounts from scientific expeditions, traditional travelogues from private journeys, or novels from imaginative ventures into the unknown. It seems nevertheless that the North frequently takes us beyond the traditional narrative forms into what, for lack of a better term, might be called composite or multigeneric narratives, that is narratives that are a fusion or a combination of several more traditional narrative genres. It is difficult to generalize as to how unique this crisscrossing of narrative forms is for the Arctic North, but it is striking that some of the best writers on the region do create stories that borrow elements from a wide range of narrative forms.

To exemplify this phenomenon, the rest of this article will therefore be devoted to one particular writer, namely Fridtjof Nansen, and his book *Farthest North*, about the *Fram* expedition towards the North Pole from 1893 to 1896.⁴ What is particularly striking about Nansen is that, in line with suggestions mentioned above of the many-sided quality of the Arctic, he unites in one person a whole series of narrative voices. He is, first of all, a natural scientist (a doctor of zoology), but he is also a classical explorer. In addition, he emerges or poses as an engineer and an anthropologist, as a mythographer and a historian, and furthermore he is a writer with a well-developed sense of narrative techniques usually associated with fiction. And on top of that he is a pictorial artist of undeniable quality. He covers, in other words, an impressive register, which produces a plethora of literary genres that take his work well beyond the average expedition report.

In the very first line of *Farthest North*, that is from the beginning of the introduction, Nansen chooses a very particular voice, with highly recognizable genre characteristics:

³ Ref. the abduction of an Inuit man, woman and child to England during Martin Frobisher's second expedition to Baffin Island in 1577 (Savours 1999: 5).

⁴ For an in-depth study of Nansen's book, and later books inspired by it, see Silje Solheim Karlsen's doctoral dissertation *Triumf, lojalitet, avstand: Fridtjof Nansens Fram-ekspedisjon (1893-1896) – og bøker i dens kjølvann* (2011): ch. 2, which deals with several genre features of travel literature in general and polar travel literature in particular, and ch. 3, which discusses Nansen's book in considerable detail, have both provided useful supplements to the following and, necessarily, more condensed reading of the text. See also Henning Howlid Wærp's *Arktisk litteratur* (2017) for some more general reflections on Nansen's and other writers' literary approach to the Arctic.

Unseen and untrodden under their spotless mantle of ice the rigid polar regions slept the profound sleep of death from the earliest dawn of time. Wrapped in his white shroud, the mighty giant stretched his clammy ice-limbs abroad, and dreamed his age-long dreams.

Ages passed—deep was the silence.

Then, in the dawn of history, far away in the south, the awakening spirit of man reared its head on high and gazed over the earth. To the south it encountered warmth, to the north, cold; and behind the boundaries of the unknown, it placed in imagination the twin kingdoms of consuming heat and of deadly cold (Nansen 2002: 1).

The voice is almost like that of God himself, or some timeless, distant observer, speaking in what is clearly a very deliberate, almost studied, archaic language, reminiscent of corresponding passages from ancient creation myths (Karlsen 2011: 76), or more recently, works like Tolkien's *Silmarillion* (1977).

From this, he then cautiously moves into a different mode; though still within a mythological framework, he offers a first intimation of place names, with very explicit cultural connotations, and man-related creatures: "Shrouded in fog lay the mythic land of Nivlheim, where the 'Rimturser' [frost giants] carried on their wild gambols" (Nansen 2002: 1). As a next stage, he begins to link this world, which is still unpopulated, to human endeavour and exploration, while at the same time staying within the world of mythology and sagas, creating a peculiar blend:

Why did we continually return to the attack? There in the darkness and cold stood Helheim, where the death-goddess held her sway; there lay Nâstrand, the shore of corpses. Thither, where no living being could draw breath, thither troop after troop made its way. To what end? Was it to bring home the dead, as did Hermod when he rode after Baldur? No! It was simply to satisfy man's thirst for knowledge (Nansen 2002: 1-2).

Here the modern world and science suddenly enter the picture, partly in the form of semi-rhetorical questions. The "thirst for knowledge," however, is not just a scientific interest; it is also an interest in power and natural resources, which again takes him to the next and more explicitly historical stage, namely the Vikings: "Our ancestors, the old Vikings, were the first Arctic voyagers" (Nansen 2002: 2), which is followed by a whole catalogue of historical heroes who explored the North.

Next follows a new and anthropological perspective with the description of "the uncivilized polar tribes," who had discovered "the sledge, usually drawn by dogs" as "an excellent method of locomotion" (Nansen 2002: 4). This is again followed by a steady narrative build-up to the *genuine* topic of the book, namely the actual voyage with the *Fram* toward the North Pole.

At this point it becomes even more difficult to decide what kind of a narrative this really is, because it wavers between a range of perspectives. Like a traditional historian, he provides an updated and largely objective account

of the latest attempts to reach the Pole, and then rather unexpectedly brings himself into focus by zooming in on his own great epiphany, almost like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, namely the moment when he read the article in the Norwegian newspaper *Morgenbladet* about the Siberian driftwood found on the other side of the Arctic. This is what, apparently out of the blue, gave him the whole spectacular idea for the voyage.

The readers may here well ask themselves whether they are reading a confessional, a fantasy novel, a travel account or a scientific treatise, because all of a sudden, Nansen makes a surprise announcement:

My plan is, briefly, as follows: I propose to have a ship built, as small and strong as possible; just big enough to contain supplies of coals and provisions for twelve men for five years. A ship of about 170 tons (gross) will probably suffice. Its engine should be powerful enough to give a speed of 6 knots; but in addition it must also be fully rigged for sailing (Nansen 2002: 14).

His objective is “to choose a fitting place and moor the ship firmly between suitable ice-floes, and then let the ice screw itself together as much as it likes—the more the better. The ship will simply be hoisted up and will ride safely and firmly” (Nansen 2002: 16).⁵

Nansen’s plan, in other words, is very deliberately to break the first and most basic commandment of polar naval exploration: never allow your ship to get beset, or caught in the ice, because it means certain death. Instead of acknowledging this rule, and bowing to traditional wisdom and experience, he comments with evident relish that “most of the polar travelers and Arctic authorities declared, more or less openly, that it was sheer madness” (Nansen 2002: 19), including a united Geographical Society in London, where he presents his plans in 1892, a year before departure. According to the experts, hardly a single part of Nansen’s extensive plan makes any sense; or, as a later commentator, Clive Holland, puts it: “It is almost impossible not to think of Nansen’s proposed journey as a crazy, reckless, foolhardy, virtually suicidal act of bravado” (Holland 1994: 111).

One literary and religious allusion that comes to mind when reading Nansen’s introduction, and that may form a part of the literary effect of the narrative of this nightmare expedition, is the fact that it echoes another and archetypal story, namely that of Noah’s ark in Genesis. The idea of this solitary ship, built to sail alone in a vast emptiness with no predetermined itinerary or destination—a voyage left to the whims of nature, only to see what the result will be—really has close similarities to Noah’s equally fantastic, unique

⁵ The fact that Nansen chose the name *Fram* (Norw. “forward”) for his ship may be another indication that his whole project was as much inspired by fiction and imagination as by fact and realism; it is hardly a coincidence that the ship’s name is a Norwegian translation of the French *En avant*, which is the name of Captain Hatteras’s ship in Jules Verne’s famous novel from 1874 (Fjågesund 2014: 371).

and high-risk project, though with the exception that Nansen's voyage is not sanctioned or initiated by God, but exclusively by the leader of the expedition himself. As is often the case with powerful literature, there are qualities between the lines that we may not consciously register, but that still exert an influence on our reading, and in this case the story from Genesis seems to reverberate through our minds, adding a mythical and awe-inspiring dimension. Looking back on it, and reading Nansen's own account, one can only agree with the experts that the *Fram* expedition must have been one of the most fantastic, most meaningless and, in some sense, *least* scientific expeditions ever. At the same time, one may also have to admit that, being on a par with the great mythological journeys, undertaken against all possible odds, it has more than a share of the famous literary quest motif. It almost amounts to a challenge to the gods, an act—as suggested earlier—of human *hubris*, which almost begs for *nemesis* and disaster, but which, precisely for that reason, cannot fail to exert some strange fascination on the reader.

Furthermore, it is quite clear that Nansen, like a good novelist, who knows how to build suspense, also deliberately stimulates and even enhances this expectation of disaster, to make the risk look as giant, and disaster as inevitable, as possible. And rather strangely he achieves this with a narrative style that points almost entirely in the opposite direction; it is deadpan and apparently completely down-to-earth. With very factual and sober language, he describes how he plans to succeed: "For the success of such an expedition two things only are required: viz. good clothing, and plenty of food, and these we can take care to have with us. [...] Thus it seems to me there is an overwhelming probability that such an expedition would be successful" (Nansen 2002: 16-17). Again, Nansen appears to choose his words in order to achieve a calculated effect, because he knows better than anyone that the opinion of all the authorities is unanimously against him.

And he ups the stakes even further. In case we as readers are worried about the Arctic cold, he can assure us that the mean temperature is probably "only" about minus 36 °C at the Pole—nothing compared to Yakutsk, with minus 42 °C, and Verkhoyansk in Siberia at minus 48 °C (Nansen 2002: 17)! Thus, he ends the introduction on a high and excessively risky note, placing himself over an abyss into which he might plunge because of his own foolhardiness, or from which he may save himself with superhuman luck and ingenuity.

From here, he makes another transition, in the first chapter, called "Preparations and Equipment," to describe in detail the construction of the ship, the expertise of the shipbuilder, Colin Archer, and the quantities of scientific instruments he intends to bring (Nansen 2002: 37). In these passages, Nansen emerges not only as an engineer and practical organizer, but primarily as a natural scientist, with both feet firmly on the ground. Although he was only thirty-two when the expedition started, he had taken a doctorate in zoology at the age of twenty-seven, and he had planned a mass of scientific activities in

the course of the voyage. Still, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he deliberately confuses and manipulates the reader to achieve his desired effect.

Consequently, chapter 2, “The Start,” begins in yet another, entirely different fashion—with an intensely private and emotional moment, which also reads like a novel or a self-scrutinizing entry in a diary:

It was midsummer day. A dull, gloomy day; and with it came the inevitable leave-taking. The door closed behind me. For the last time I left my home, and went alone down the garden to the beach where the *Fram*’s little petroleum launch awaited me. Behind me lay all I held dear in life. And what before me? How many years would pass ere I should see it all again? What would I not have given at that moment to be able to turn back; but at the window little Liv was sitting clapping her hands (Nansen 2002: 41).

Liv is his little daughter, but strangely, his wife Eva, a professional singer of ballads and romances whom he had married only four years before, is not mentioned, except for an enigmatic sentence a few paragraphs later, as he is sailing out the fjord: “Through the glass one could descry a summer-clad figure by the bench under the fir tree...” (Nansen 2002: 42). He even uses (in the original Norwegian version as well as in the English translation), the impersonal “one,” which underlines a sense of distance and estrangement that painfully contradicts the emotional intimacy we may have reason to expect at this crucial moment of parting and departure. From now on we will only hear occasional and implicit references to his wife, generally phrased as sighs of longing for those at home.⁶

Then, once again without warning, off we go; the voyage begins, and the story begins, and the telling of the story is almost worthy of the writings of Knut Hamsun around the same time, for instance his travel book *In Wonderland* (orig. *I Æventyrland*) from the Caucasus from only two years later.⁷ Almost on a par with the ship itself, which is being carried along on a helter-skelter, roller-coaster ride from the northern tip of Norway through the Kara Sea and along the Siberian coast, and then straight into the merciless clutches of the ice, we are following the author’s emotional swings, which in their violence almost mirror those of the ship itself. But it starts very down-to-earth. As before setting sail, he describes the practical work:

⁶ See for instance pp. 120 and 175. As the whole book is dedicated to Eva, however, she somehow hovers above the narrative throughout, but again vaguely and at a considerable distance from actual events. The dedication is not included in the English translation—an example of how different editions and translations may affect the reading of a text. For a discussion of the relationship between Nansen and his wife during his voyage, see Huntford 2000: ch. 37.

⁷ Henning Howlid Wærp (2012) also makes a brief comparison to Hamsun’s *In Wonderland* (1903). For a more detailed reading of this work, and Hamsun’s/the narrator’s incessant playing of hide-and-seek with the reader, see also Fjågesund (2020).

There was the care of the ship and rigging, the inspection of sails, ropes, etc, etc; there were provisions of all kinds to be got out from the cases down in the hold, and handed over to the cook; there was ice—good, pure, fresh-water ice—to be found and carried to the galley to be melted for cooking, drinking and washing water (Nansen 2002: 101).

Then in his description of the arctic night and the aurora borealis, feelings come to the surface, and he turns to a profoundly poetic prose:

Nothing more wonderfully beautiful can exist than the Arctic night. [...] Presently the aurora borealis shakes over the vault of heaven its veil of glittering silver—changing now to yellow, now to green, now to red. It spreads, it contracts again, in restless change, next it breaks into waving, many-folded bands of shining silver, over which shoot billows of glittering rays; and then the glory vanishes. [...] *This* is the coming earth—here are beauty and death. But to what purpose? Ah, what is the purpose of all these spheres? Read the answer if you can in the starry firmament (Nansen 2002: 104-105).

But when they are not making the progress he expected, there is self-scrutiny and emotional collapse, and it is as if he acknowledges to his imagined critics that they were obviously right all along:

My plan has come to nothing. That palace of theory, which I reared in pride and self-confidence, high above all silly objections, has fallen like a house of cards at the first breath of wind. Build up the most ingenious theories, and you may be sure of one thing—that fact will defy them all. Was I so very sure? Yes, at times; but that was self-deception, intoxication (Nansen 2002: 123).

Later, in this entirely male colony on board the ship caught for years in the ice, he reflects on the Arctic night as a woman, but a woman of a peculiarly cold, erotic quality:

[...] But, O Arctic night, thou art like a woman, a marvellously lovely woman. Thine are the noble, pure outlines of antique beauty, with its marble coldness. On thy high, smooth brow, clear with the clearness of ether, is no trace of compassion for the little sufferings of despised humanity, on thy pale, beautiful cheek no blush of feeling. [...] The proud lines of thy throat, thy shoulder, curves, are so noble, but, oh! unbendingly cold; thy bosom's white chastity is feelingless as the snowy ice. Chaste, beautiful, and proud, thou floatest through ether over the frozen sea, thy glittering garment, woven of aurora beams, covering the vault of heaven. But sometimes I divine a twitch of pain on thy lips, and endless sadness dreams in thy dark eye (Nansen 2002: 144).

At the same time, he also personifies the *Fram* itself into a woman, but a very different one, namely a much-loved mother, who provides security and comfort to a crew who are her children: "And why should we not love her? No mother can give her young more warmth and safety under her wings than she affords us. She is indeed like a home to us" (Nansen 2002: 223). Thus, there is a female element here, but it is enigmatic and vague, and somehow reflective of a

nineteenth-century stereotype of the woman as either dangerous temptress or a secure and reassuring mother figure.⁸

A very different aspect of the narrative, which surprisingly does not seem to have been commented on by critics, is the striking contrast between the peaceful, friendly and almost feminine domesticity among the men inside the ship, on the one hand, and the constant presence in the narrative of violence, hunting and killing, with strongly masculine overtones, on the other. First of all, it may be assumed that a competent handler of sled dogs would find Nansen's descriptions of the dogs' infighting and cruelty against each other a strong indication that he and his men were not properly qualified for the task.⁹ Admittedly, he confesses to a feeling of loss and regret when individual dogs are killed or have to be killed, but generally he complains about their brutality to each other, and leaves it at that.¹⁰ More importantly, however, the book is an endless catalogue of killing and slaughter of polar bears, seals, walruses and foxes. Clearly, hunting provided an important food supply for the dogs as well as the crew, and was thus an integral part of the voyage's plan, but there still seems to be an insatiable appetite for killing, and there is never mentioned any kind of compassion or consideration with the animals in question. Even after a heart-rending account of a badly wounded mother bear who "had followed her daughter's funeral procession for some way" after Nansen and his men had killed her, he comments: "We have only one matter for regret in connection with this bear episode, and that is the disappearance of two dogs" (Nansen 2002: 116). This attitude, which permeates the whole narrative, serves as a rather stark reminder of how Nansen takes a heavily male-biased anthropocentrism completely for granted; the animal world of the Arctic is something he and his men can help themselves to without any scruples, and to use as instruments to fulfil their own ambition.

All in all, there is a peculiar pendular movement of narrative styles, because the moment he and Hjalmar Johansen decide to leave the relatively safe haven of the ship and set out on their even madder expedition to the North Pole with a group of dogs, he returns once again to twelve solid pages of detailed, practical description of the preparations, a description which is followed by an intense and highly dramatic account of their journey, which includes some very close calls in the form of polar bear attacks and the drifting off of their kayaks, which Nansen has to swim out among the ice floes to recover.

As in the description of the planning of the expedition, Nansen also makes sure, in his account of his and Johansen's departure from the *Fram*, that this time too he is acting against all sensible advice, and burning all his bridges,

⁸ See Karlsen's discussion of the feminine and masculine elements, Karlsen 2011: 91-96.

⁹ Despite a training session when they collected the dogs in Siberia (57), Nansen's account of his own first sled trip with them later on (117) strongly suggests such an interpretation.

¹⁰ Nansen also reads Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) while on the trip (114).

thus creating a suspense that makes the reader feel that they are setting out on yet another suicide mission. It is almost like a Chinese box of ever-increasing risk: first, the idea of going to the North Pole, in the first place; second, the idea of deliberately succumbing to the deadly forces of the ice with the ship; and third, the idea of seeking yet further risk by leaving it. And if the building of the *Fram* was reminiscent of the building of Noah's ark, their overwintering at Franz Joseph Land on their return journey carries considerable similarities to another archetypal fictional text, namely Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, in the way they are stuck on a desert island and have to improvise ingenious practical solutions to survive. Even the chance encounter between Nansen and Jackson carries a striking similarity to that of Crusoe and Friday—although it might be difficult to decide who of the two is Crusoe and who is Friday! The only difference is that *their* chance of survival is far slimmer than that of Crusoe.¹¹ Thus, the way Defoe had produced a piece of fiction that almost used every possible trick to come across as reality, Nansen's very real story had all the ingredients of hard-to-believe fiction.

In what truly turns into a cornucopia of incredible incidents, there is even room for elements of comedy, as when he describes their celebration of Christmas Eve on Franz Joseph Land:

Johansen has turned his shirt, and put the outside shirt next to him; I have done the same, and then I have changed my drawers [i.e. underwear], and put on the others that I had wrung out in warm water. And I have washed myself, too, in a quarter of a cup of warm water, with the discarded drawers as sponge and towel. Now I feel quite another being; my clothes do not stick to my body as much as they did (Nansen 2002: 406).

In an almost carnivalesque inversion of the many stereotyped stories about death and starvation in the Arctic, and even of the critical predicament in which they found themselves, Nansen also makes a point of the fact that as both of them are eating huge quantities of polar bear flesh and walrus blubber, they gain so much weight that Nansen is ten kilos heavier when they are rescued than when he left the *Fram*!

Again, Nansen's narrative creates an amazing tension between a madly high-risk venture, whose statistical chance of succeeding is almost nil, and accounts of how they are surviving dramatic ordeals with a wry smile and an almost devil-may-care attitude, the sum of which is a potentially wide array of interpretations, depending on the individual reader's response to the author's numerous antics. Almost regardless of this, however, Nansen emerges from the expedition as a hero whose incredible achievement is carefully disguised behind a narrative that focuses on a commendable down-to-earthness and a

¹¹ For the late nineteenth-century reader, the meeting between Nansen and Jackson also must have carried a remarkable similarity to that between Henry Morton Stanley and Dr. Livingstone by the Lake Tanganyika in 1871.

sense of humility. But most importantly, it seems that in order to capture the immensity of the experience and the world he is exploring, Nansen resorts to a jumble of narrative forms and techniques, which he gathers into a narrative, which—almost as much against the odds as the voyage itself—manages to land with its feet on the ground and emerge as a powerful and unified whole. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the book sold as many as 20,000 copies in Norway in the first year of its publication and also became a minor bestseller abroad (Howlid Wærp 2012: 237).

Several of Nansen's predecessors had, like travel writers in general, been very conscious about marketing themselves as heroic figures, but it may justifiably be claimed that Nansen did this with a thoroughness and with a sophisticated design that is quite unique. In addition, his use of illustrations, both artistic drawings, some of which were his own, and photos, many of which showed important scenes that must have been reconstructed and rephotographed, shows that he was intensely aware of their marketing and PR potential. Indeed, his illustrations really serve as a narrative genre of their own; they tell the story for him. Consider, for instance, the famous scene of his apparently chance rescue and meeting with Frederick Jackson on Franz Josef Land, where the photograph of the actual meeting has not only been reconstructed, as there was hardly a photographer on call when they happened to meet; there may even be reason to suspect that the images were later manipulated to make Nansen look vaguely superhuman in size next to Jackson. And making the front page of *The London Illustrated News* in September 1896 must have represented a considerable PR scoop and contributed significantly to Nansen's reputation abroad. A further confirmation of his popularity is found in all the musical compositions, many of which were published as sheet music to be played in private homes, that were composed in the aftermath of the expedition to celebrate his achievement. That, too, says something about the success with which Nansen had managed to present his story to the public.

All in all, underneath all of Nansen's narrative strategies lies very clearly an extremely cunning and conscious awareness of how to promote himself, and with that in view he seems to have adopted an amazing range of narrative forms to obtain his goal, triggering others in the process. The best indication of the solidity with which he built his image as a national and international hero, and in modern terminology, a brand, probably came in 1905, when there is every reason to believe that he could have become the first president of a republican Norway, if the political winds had blown in that direction. Instead, he fought to re-establish a monarchy on the ancient foundations of the Viking kings, and won that battle, too, only to go on to becoming an international celebrity once again, for his work to save nearly half a million refugees in the aftermath of the First World War.

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