

## *Different Norths*

– *Visions of Scandinavia in Contemporary Italian Literature*

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IN NICOLA LECCA'S 2006 NOVEL *Hotel Borg*, different characters from all over Europe come together to meet their fate in an ice-cold Reykjavík, described as an other-worldly place, almost beyond imagination. One of these characters, Swedish-born but German-raised orchestra director Alexander Norberg has chosen Reykjavík as the only possible setting for the concert which will prematurely close his celebrated career: after directing Giovanni Battista Draghi Pergolesi's *Stabat mater* in Reykjavík's cathedral, before fifty-two Icelandic citizens selected by lot from the telephone catalogue, he will never perform again. The narrator explains Norberg's decision thus:

Per il suo ultimo concerto, Alexander voleva provarci ancora [a dirigere lo *Stabat Mater*], estendendo la durata delle prove, nel tentativo di cancellare ogni imperfezione: ma serviva un luogo che fosse adatto al dolore. Un luogo piccolo e freddo.<sup>1</sup>

(For his last concert, Alexander wanted to try again [to direct *Stabat Mater*], extending rehearsal hours, in the attempt to erase every imperfection: but he needed a place that was suited for pain. A small and cold place.)

While in the novel Reykjavík is described in some topographical detail, Lecca's aim does not seem to be to offer a realistic depiction of life in the Icelandic capital; on the contrary, both his Icelandic and non-Icelandic characters tend to experience this "città infantile – che vive all'ombra del mondo" ("child-like city – living in the shadow of the world")<sup>2</sup> as a sort of mythical place which both attracts and repulses them, offering freedom and glory while at the same time threatening with annihilation. It is not a unique approach: this paper will focus on four contemporary Italian works of literature, stemming from different genres and traditions, which all deploy a similar version of the North; Nicola Lecca's *Hotel Borg* is a novel in the strict sense;<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Manganelli's *L'isola pianeta* (*The Planet Island*, 2006) is a posthumous collection of articles and reportages written during the 1970s and 1980s;<sup>4</sup> Simona Vinci's *Nel bianco* (*Into the White*, 2008) is a travelogue recounting a trip to Iceland and Greenland;<sup>5</sup> while Leonardo Piccione's *Il libro dei vulcani d'Islanda* (*The Book of the*

<sup>1</sup> Nicola Lecca, *Hotel Borg*, Milano: Mondadori, 2018 [2006], p. 52. All translations, unless stated otherwise, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Nicola Lecca, *Hotel Borg*, 2018, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Nicola Lecca (Cagliari, 1976) is a novelist and short-story writer from Sardinia. *Hotel Borg* is his third novel, written after a year and a half spent in Iceland.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Manganelli (Milan, 1922-Rome, 1930) was a literary critic, translator, experimental writer and journalist, known for his expressionist, baroque style.

<sup>5</sup> Simona Vinci (Milano, 1970) is a novelist and short story writer. *Nel bianco* was her first non-fiction work.

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Piccione (Corato, 1987), is a statistician and reporter from Southern Italy, *Il libro dei vulcani d'Islanda* is his first and so far only book.

*Volcanoes of Iceland*) is a travel guide of sorts to the natural wonders of the island.<sup>6</sup>

Despite been so different, both in style and aim, all these texts depict a strikingly coherent image of the North, deploying a range of common narrative and even linguistic features. In their encounter with Scandinavia—either through fiction or autobiographical narratives—all four authors draw heavily on pre-existing images of the North. In so doing, all four texts make use of representational strategies that combine features of contemporary travel writing with an almost Romantic attitude; in doing so they also put a peculiar emphasis on problems of representability, thus coming closer to postmodern interpretations of the concept of the sublime.

### *The North as literary place*

Though representations of the North always tend to shift and to swing between extremes, in all four texts under scrutiny we get the sense that, for the non-Nordic observer, the North is located at the geographical and cultural margins of Europe. Whether they are depicting Oslo or Greenland, whether they are investigating the customs and habits of contemporary Scandinavians or the ancient Inuit legends, whether their intertextual literary references are Peter Høeg's *Smilla's Sense for Snow* or the Icelandic sagas, they all stage the trip to the North as a kind of heroic exploration of the Arctic, where solitude and isolation allow travelers to discover some kind of hidden truth about themselves and human existence.

According to Peter Davidson, “[o]ne of the persistent myths of the North in our own time is that the exploration of the Arctic is morally pure, connected with concepts such as askesis and self-knowledge”.<sup>7</sup> The journey to the North is thus equated with “authenticity or heroism”<sup>8</sup> and tends to become “a journey into a kind of truth”.<sup>9</sup> This myth of North reveals a peculiar brand of exoticization that, drawing on Edward Said's concept of orientalism, has been defined as “borealism”<sup>10</sup> or “arcticity”,<sup>11</sup> according to which the “true North” is to be found primarily in the North Atlantic area (comprising Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and sometimes Northern Norway) that Karen Oslund identifies as “a Northern borderlands”:<sup>12</sup> a place of exploration and adventure, an almost mythical and unknown site of exotic otherness.

In the literary works that I am addressing, going North seems a way to leave behind one's own place within a specific culture to gain access to a pure, untamed and untamable natural space. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson has identified different prototypical representations of Scandinavia that started to be disseminated in European culture already from the classical age; among the most common stereotypes about the North in the current

<sup>7</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 2005, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North*, 2005, p. 113.

<sup>10</sup> Kristinn Schram, *Borealism: folkloristic perspectives on transnational performances and the exoticism of the North*, PhD Dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Gísli Pálsson, “Arcticity: gender, race and geography in the writings of Vilhjálmur Stefánsson”, in Michael Bravo & Sverker Sörlin, *Narrating the Arctic: a cultural history of nordic scientific practices*, Canton: Science History Publications, 2002, pp. 275-310.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Oslund, *Iceland Imagined. Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*, Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2011, p. 14-18.

age he finds: the Utopian North; the Historical or Original North; the Creative North; the Progressive North; the Unfeeling or Unemotional North; the Wealthy North; the Evil or Immoral North.<sup>13</sup> Although almost all of them are, to a certain degree, present in my selection of texts, it is the first three that are particularly relevant: “the Utopian North” is an image of Scandinavia where people live in close contact and balance with nature; “the Historical North” pictures Scandinavia as a place where past traditions are still alive and well; “the Creative North” depicts the North as a place of freedom, self-exploration and creativity. If these stereotypes are sometimes validated by Scandinavians themselves,<sup>14</sup> in our case they find reinforcement in the symbolical opposition to equally stereotyped images of the South; according to Peter Stadius, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the North, as seen from the South, is both a barbaric periphery and a site of progress and advancement.

The myth about the mystic North is consistent with the results presented by Siri Nergaard in her study on the politics of literary translation from Norwegian to Italian. While Norwegians have long been striving to build a specific national identity, Nergaard finds that on the Italian part there is much confusion on the political reality of Scandinavia: the different Scandinavian nations are perceived as a homogeneous entity, a dim and melancholy place whose main attributes are the cold, the darkness, the scarce populace, and the silence. The literary works that are selected for translation often focus on the most dramatic aspects of human life, and on the never-ending conflict between mankind and nature.<sup>15</sup>

This tradition has a long history within Italian culture; if we, for instance, take into account how pre-romantic poet Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803), in his posthumous autobiography, described his first sight of Stockholm—during a trip taken in his twenties—we can notice most of those clichés that Italian publishers and readers, according to Nergaard, love to find in Norwegian literature:

La novità di quello spettacolo, e la greggia maestosa natura di quelle immense selve, laghi, e dirupi, moltissimo mi trasportavano; e benché non avessi mai letto l'Ossian, molte di quelle sue immagini mi si destavano ruvidamente scolpite, e quali le ritrovai poi descritte allorché più anni dopo le lessi studiando i ben architettati versi del celebre Cesarotti.

(The novelty of this scene, and the wild aspect of those forests, lakes, and precipices, transported me beyond measure, and although I had never read Ossian, many of his vast images rose up to my fancy, rudely sculptured, as I long afterwards found them, drawn by himself in the beautifully turned verses of the celebrated Cesarotti.)<sup>16</sup>

This myth of the awe-inspiring North finds a much more radical interpretation in one of Giacomo Leopardi's *Moral Fables*, “Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese” (“Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander” (1824). This text, which gives voice to Leopardi's view of nature

<sup>13</sup> Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson “Imaginations of National Identity and the North”, in Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson & Daniel Chartier, *Iceland and Images of the North*, Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011, pp. 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> See Kristinn Schram, “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North”, in Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson & Daniel Chartier, *Iceland and Images of the North*, 2011, pp. 305-328.

<sup>15</sup> Siri Nergaard, *La costruzione di una cultura: la letteratura norvegese in traduzione italiana*, Rimini: Guaraldi, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Vittorio Alfieri, *Vita di Vittorio Alfieri da Asti scritta da esso*, Londra (Firenze): Piatti, 1804 (1807), p. 166. English translation: *The Autobiography of Vittorio Alfieri, the Tragic Poet*, transl. Charles Edwards Lester, New York: Paine and Burgess, pp. 64-65. Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730-1808) was the first Italian translator of Ossian.

as an evil stepmother, indifferent to human suffering, only gives a short glimpse of Iceland, depicted as a territory tormented by “le tempeste spaventevoli di mare e di terra, i ruggiti e le minacce del monte Ecla, il sospetto degl’incendi, frequentissimi negli alberghi, come sono i nostri, fatti di legno” (“fearful storms on land and sea, the roaring menace of Mount Hekla, and the fear of those fires which are so common in dwellings made, as ours are, of wood”).<sup>17</sup>

Leopardi’s legacy is important for at least two of the authors in my selection: in an interview, Leonardo Piccione states that his first encounter with Iceland took place in school, through Leopardi’s dialogue<sup>18</sup>; and Giorgio Manganelli quotes Leopardi’s dialogue in one of his descriptions of the Icelandic nature. According to critic Andrea Cortellessa, Leopardi’s text functions as “an existential palimpsest”<sup>19</sup> for all of Manganelli’s Scandinavian travels; but the same could be said of all four literary works: the conflict between human and nature is a recurring theme in the other texts as well, albeit with some important differences. In Lecca’s novel, the winter-beaten Icelandic capital is described in terms that resonates with Leopardi: stranded in a landscape which seems torn between the black of the lava rocks and the white of the snow and the ice. However, these very elements seem to be perceived as fascinating and even liberating instead of threatening: the arctic territory, though potentially dangerous, makes of Iceland “un luogo estraneo al resto del mondo” (“a place foreign to the rest of the world”) that instills “un senso estremo di purezza e di libertà” (“an extreme feeling of purity and freedom”).<sup>20</sup>

Also Vinci and Piccione frame the North as a space where culture and nature meet and struggle to find balance. In Piccione’s account, the volcanoes still pose a potential threat to human survival in Iceland but, unlike Leopardi, he depicts them as a fundamental part of Icelandic identity, so much so that their presence becomes almost reassuring:

Così è l’Islanda: un tentativo di convivenza forzata. Gli uomini non hanno intenzione di andarsene; i vulcani, che abitano l’isola da molto più tempo, non si astengono per nessun motivo dal rivendicarne il legittimo possesso. Di più la certezza della loro perpetua minaccia è a suo modo rassicurante; eccede il timore dei suoi esiti, e ha finito per rendere i vulcani islandesi *necessari*.<sup>21</sup> (20-21)

(This is Iceland: an attempt at forced coexistence. Men are not willing to leave; the volcanoes, who have inhabited the island for much longer, for no reason will refrain from claiming their legitimate possession. Moreover, the certainty of their ceaseless threat is reassuring in a way; it exceeds the fear of its outcomes, and in the end it has made the Icelandic volcanoes *necessary*.)

In her travelogue *Nel bianco*, Simona Vinci pays great attention to the social environment of the small Greenlandic town (Tasiilaq, on the Eastern coast) she chooses to visit: she interviews the local (Danish) doctors

<sup>17</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Operette morali*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2016, p. 119. English translation: *Moral Fables*, transl. J. G. Nichols, Richmond: Alma Books, 2017. Electronic edition.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanna Taverni, “Così mi sono perso tra i vulcani d’Islanda”. Intervista a Leonardo Piccione, 19.02.2019. <http://www.lindiependente.it/intervista-leonardo-piccione-vulcani-islanda/>. (last accessed September 23, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Cortellessa, “Mirabili deserti”, in Giorgio Manganelli, *L’isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, Milano: Adelphi, 2006, p. 315.

<sup>20</sup> Nicola Lecca, *Hotel Borg*, 2018, pp. 139-140; 89.

<sup>21</sup> Leonardo Piccione, *Il libro dei vulcani d’Islanda*, Milano: Iperborea, 2019, pp. 20-21.

and psychologists, she speaks to high-school students about their dreams for the future, she discusses issues such as alcoholism, mental health and unemployment; she sketches the colonial history of Greenland, starting from the first Norse settlers on the island; all the time, however, Vinci actually seems to be after something else: her journey “into the white” becomes a voyage into a natural space where all familiar coordinates are lost.

In all this accounts, the Arctic landscape of the North is presented as a threat not so much to the travelers’ physical safety as to their understanding. The Far North becomes a liminal site, a kind of porous threshold that allows Southern travelers to leave the notion of “place” behind and to peep into pure “space”.

### *Liminal space, liminal time*

According to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, there is a fundamental difference between the concepts, however interrelated, of “space” and “place”:

The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice-versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 6.

Vinci’s sojourn in Greenland can be read as an (ever failing) attempt to pause and transform this unknown and unknowable space into place. The first pages of the travelogue present the reader with two maps: one is a scientific map, informative and detailed, depicting the polar stations located on in Greenland in the 1880s; the other one is a self-made map, inspired by Basque travel-writer Ander Izagirre, who wrote that everyone has a map of Greenland at home: one just has to look at a blank page. This map is, accordingly, just a blank page; of course, it is this empty map that, in the end, comes to represent Vinci’s Greenlandic experience more accurately. Vinci devotes much attention to the phenomenon of the whiteout, making of it almost the most striking feature of the country she is visiting. In her account, the whiteout is not a mere atmospherical accident: it becomes an erasure of almost metaphysical proportions, that affects Vinci’s whole relation to the Greenland; no matter the refinement of contemporary meteorological science, in her account Greenland is still in the grip of Sila, the Inuit deity of weather. Not only is she unable to communicate with most of the local population; she is also incapable of making sense of distances, or of predicting how the weather will change: the form of the clouds, the texture of snow, the sparse words she is told make up for a whole world of signs that she cannot interpret. For Vinci Greenland becomes a space of complete loneliness and homelessness.

È una solitudine impersonale; guardo quelle montagne e penso che la

solitudine assoluta è la verità estrema dell'esistenza, non c'è altro. Oltre, c'è solo un'immobile bellezza senza senso. [...] L'Artico è astrazione. Oscillo tra due stati d'animo opposti: uno è consolatorio, come se quel gelo immobile ed eterno fosse la fine di ogni dolore, l'insensibilità, la sterilizzazione di ogni passione, e uno desolante, di assenza di senso che pugnala il cuore.<sup>23</sup>

(It is an impersonal loneliness; I look at those mountains and I think that absolute loneliness is the final truth of existence, there is nothing else. Beyond, there is just a motionless beauty without meaning. [...] The Arctic is abstraction. I swing between two opposite moods: one is consoling, as if that motionless, eternal cold was the end of all pain: the numbness, the sterilisation of every passion; the other one is despairing, it is an absence of meaning that stabs the heart.)

Even at the end of her stay, Greenland remains, for Vinci, an inexplicable void, a total lack of meaning; the last anecdote she recounts is a symbol of failed connection and communication: for the first time she tries to communicate with an old Inuit woman in the latter's own language, asking her her name, but the only answer she gets is “una timida, ma irrefrenabile e sputazzante risata” (“a shy, but irrepressible and sputtering laugh”).<sup>24</sup> In accordance with the rules of travel writing, Vinci finally returns home to find “her place in the world”,<sup>25</sup> but she is none the wiser when it comes to Greenland: like the blank map, it is still a white space that resists territorialisation and insists on remaining a *terra incognita*.

Even Piccione's book offers readers a series of maps, designed to guide the reader along the journey among Iceland's volcanos; each new chapter is introduced by an elevation map<sup>26</sup> of the volcano at hand. Each map is accompanied by a series of information about the volcano, listing its geological characteristics, its latest eruption, its current activity record, and the risks it poses. These scientific, informative sections create a peculiar contrast with the texts that follow, which are mainly narrative and anecdotal in style; this juxtaposition stresses one of the main themes of the book which is, as has been said, the contrast between a threatening and potentially destructive nature and a stubborn humanity. Piccioni investigates this relationship drawing partly upon the experience of modern-day scientists, who are trying to keep track of the seismic activity of the volcanos, knowing very well that they will never be able to predict the next eruption; but he also digs into historical sources describing past disasters; he makes references to literature and myths, quoting writers such as Halldór Laxness and Gunnar Gunnarsson, or the *Völuspá*. This complex web of different narratives appears as an effort to describe Iceland as “place”: something definite, something manageable, something understandable. However, the attempt to impose a meaning on the Icelandic space repeatedly fails:

<sup>23</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2009, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, the last chapter is significantly entitled “Il tuo posto nel mondo” (“Your place in the world”).

<sup>26</sup> Each map is a graphic elaboration of an actual map from the National Land Survey of Iceland.

Gli orizzonti sconfinati dell'isola [...] generano un senso di vuoto in cui l'osservatore sperimenta un'oggettiva difficoltà a prendere le misure. È una sensazione che annichilisce e insieme espone a una centralità inattesa: in mezzo al nulla, o diventi anche tu parte del nulla oppure rischi di essere tutto.<sup>27</sup> (12)

(The boundless horizons of the island [...] create a sense of emptiness in which the observer experiences an objective difficulty in taking measures. It is a feeling that annihilates and at the same time exposes to an unexpected centrality: in the middle of nothing, you either become part of the nothingness or you run the risk of being everything.)

It is an ambiguous position Piccione describes here: the subject is torn between erasure and centrality, between fullness and annihilation, between becoming one with the surrounding landscape and disappearing. Becoming and boundaries are key words here: Iceland is presented, in this text, as a liminal space, a transit zone, as in anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's definition: a borderland where the physical passage of a perceived threshold becomes a spiritual passage, a movement beyond geographical, cultural, and even metaphysical borders.<sup>28</sup>

Drawing on the work of van Gennep and British anthropologist Victor Turner, Bjørn Thomassen describes liminality as “a paradoxical state, both at the individual and the societal level. At the level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity, while at the level of society it involves the suspension of the structure of social order.”<sup>29</sup> While originally deployed in anthropology to study societal and individual rites of passage, the concept of liminality has found application in other fields of the humanities, to designate the in-between-ness of certain places—both real and imagined—and of the individual experiences that they accommodate. In their introduction to the anthology *Landscapes of Liminality*, Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, Elizabeth Parker describe liminal spaces as “those which are, simultaneously, place and space. They are familiar, yet unknown; they are secure, and yet intimidating.”<sup>30</sup> In addition, writes Robert T. Tally Jr.:

The limen suggests a space more explicitly understood as a site of transgressivity, a point of entry into another zone. Unlike the closed space or place given form by its perceived limits (limites), the liminal space or site of the limen is one of opening, unfolding, or becoming.<sup>31</sup>

The above quote from Piccione well illustrates the “existential liminality” brought about by the confusion between place and space: the unraveling of the I that Piccione seems to suggest is mimicked by the book's narrative form itself: the text cannot find a single discourse that fully captures the ‘real’ Iceland; it proceeds on the border between literature and science, between individual and collective narratives, even between words and images.

<sup>27</sup> Leonardo Piccione, *Il libro dei vulcani d'Islanda*, 2019, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. Monika B. Vizedom & Gabrielle L. Caffee, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

<sup>29</sup> Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the modern. Living through the in-Between*, Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate, 2014, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Dara Downey, Ian Kinane & Elizabeth Parker, “Locating Liminality: Space, Place, and the In-Between”, in Dara Downey, Ian Kinane & Elizabeth Parker (eds.), *Landscapes of Liminality. Between Space and Place*, London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Robert T. Tally Jr., *Topophrenia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019, p. 55.

Manganelli's reportages represent even more explicitly the North as a liminal site. In one of the texts, the writer enumerates the different borders he is crossing moving northwards. While Manganelli traces a basic divide—along religious and linguistic lines—between South and North, he depicts Scandinavia as further divided within itself. Manganelli tends to describe Sweden and Denmark with references to their culture: Sweden is depicted as “un disordine estremamente ordinato” (“an extremely ordinated chaos”)<sup>32</sup>, a highly ritualized society (Manganelli's attention focuses on the dynamics of a strike in the public sector and on the Nobel prize ceremony); Denmark (especially Copenhagen) is described in terms of its artistic and intellectual life (with references to Kierkegaard, Andersen, Blixen, Jacobsen and Thorvaldsen, and with many comments on the architecture of the capital). Norway, on the other hand, is a sort of intermediate place, a site of passage: it becomes literally a way leading to the True North of the Faroe and Iceland:

Danimarca e Svezia da una parte, la Scandinavia europea; dall'altra Islanda e Fær Øer, il Nord periferico, centrifugo. E la Norvegia? In Norvegia si misurano due anime del Nord; da un lato Oslo guarda verso l'Europa, è Europa; ma in una Norvegia vasta e inafferrabile, fuori dalle grandi città, resiste e si fa strada una idea antica, mitica e purista, dura ed esigente, di quel Nord che si mantiene intatto in Islanda e che ha recuperato il suo potere nelle Fær Øer.<sup>33</sup>

(Denmark and Sweden on one side, the European Scandinavia; on the other side, Iceland and Faroe, the peripheral, centrifugal North. What about Norway? In Norway one can perceive two souls of the North; on the one hand, Oslo looks towards Europe, it is Europe; but within a vast, elusive Norway, outside of the big cities, an ancient idea—mythical and purist, hard and demanding—still exists and gets ahead; an idea of the North that is still intact in Iceland and that has got back its hold in the Faroe).

Flying northwards above the Atlantic becomes, for Manganelli, a rite of passage that marks the exit from a human-dominated place and the entrance into a space where nature is—in a Leopardian sense—fully indifferent to mankind:

Questo cielo non è più la raffinata variante del cielo europeo che avevo ammirato a Copenhagen; né l'indifferente, abbagliante dimora delle nuvole spietate sopra l'Atlantico. Questo è un cielo, come oggi si dice, diverso. [...] Il cielo ha questo di singolare: di apparire come l'unico destinatario della luce di un sole impegnato in un infinito tramonto; un sole che ignora la terra, innamorato di quella sfera dimezzata, quel vetro infinitamente esile e secco.<sup>34</sup>

(This sky is no longer the refined variation on the European sky I had admired in Copenhagen, nor the indifferent, blinding abode of merciless clouds above the Atlantic. This sky is, as you say nowadays, different.

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Un disordine estremamente ordinato” (1971), in *L'isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Terra estranea” (1989), in *L'isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 267.

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Crudeltà delle nuvole” (1978), in *L'isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 49.

[...] What is peculiar about this sky is this: that it seems to be the only beneficiary of the light of a sun eternally setting; a sun that ignores the Earth, in love with that halved sphere, that infinitely thin and dry glass.)

The same sense of liminality that we get from these images of the North as a place where culture and nature are put up against each other can be found even in the relationship between past and present. Much as the violent nature of the North is always on the point of resurfacing, shuttering the fragile constructions of culture, the past is always looming on the present. Echoes of the Viking age are ubiquitous in the texts. In Lecca's novel, Hákon, the most prominent Icelandic character, is described—rather unsurprisingly—as a Viking. In Piccione's book, the constant juxtaposition of anecdotes from different eras gives the impression that in Iceland time stands still, and that the basic rules of human existence have stayed constant throughout a thousand years. In Manganelli, references to the Viking Age and to Old Norse literature are scattered throughout his reportages, especially when it comes to Iceland, whose inhabitants are described as the keepers of the common Scandinavian past.

In addition to this, Manganelli often describes Icelandic and Faroese nature as primordial; the land seem to belong to a complete different time sphere than mankind; while Iceland still seems to belong to the beginnings of time—or rather, to a dimension before the beginnings of time—men are creatures “of the after”, trapped and carried away in the linear passing of time:

La creazione è appena finita, Dio suda, ha le mani sporche di universo, un universo ancora informe, sfinito dal parto e felice, sebbene ignaro, della propria esistenza, selvatica e pigra. Ma noi, noi uomini, descrittori del mondo, siamo del “dopo”, siamo avventizi, possiamo solo avvertire quella coscienza confusa ed enorme che ci accerchia [...] <sup>35</sup>

(Creation is barely over, God is sweating, his hands are dirty with the universe, a shapeless universe so far, exhausted by labour and—though clueless—happy with its own wild and lazy existence. But we, mankind, the describers of the world, we belong to the “after”, we are foreigners, we can only sense the confused and enormous conscience that surrounds us.)

Even in Vinci the Viking past seems to be the most important key to understanding present Iceland and Greenland.<sup>36</sup> Much prominence, for instance, is given to Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, who according to the sagas,<sup>37</sup> was the mother of Snorri, the first European born on the American soil. Her statue stands on the shore of Iceland, on the extreme margins of Europe, and Vinci describes her as “una madonna laica, senza smancerie, debolezze o bisogno di miracoli: è lei stessa il miracolo” (“a secular madonna, with no sappiness, no weaknesses, no need for miracles:

<sup>35</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Terra estrema” (1978), in *L'isola pianeta e altri settemtrioni*, 2006, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Besides echoes of the Viking past, references to folklore are equally important. Manganelli, in particular, is keen on describing Icelanders as especially close to the realm of the supernatural, mentioning their reliance on dreams and premonitions, and their special connection with “fairies”. Once again, Iceland is described as a paradoxical space where technology and rational modernity lives side by side with deeply treasured beliefs inherited from the past.

<sup>37</sup> She is mentioned in *Grænlendinga Saga* and in *Eirik's Saga*; see Magnus Magnusson & Herman Pálsson (ed.), *The Vinland Sagas*, London: Penguin, 1965.

she herself is the miracle”).<sup>38</sup> Posited between the Old and the New World, a trace of past expeditions and a prefiguration of the narrator’s own journey, Guðríður becomes an embodiment of liminality, as well as the promise of a possible connection between past and present: all of the sudden the mist descends on the landscape, and Vinci has the feeling of being “di colpo fuori dal tempo” (“all of a sudden outside of time”).<sup>39</sup>

The sense of moving beyond the usual spatial and temporal coordinates is reinforced, in Vinci’s text, by three fictional interludes that punctuate the autobiographical narrative. All three narratives are focused on liminal situations, between life and death, past and present, the human and the natural world: the last one is inspired by the actual suicide of a young girl; the second one focuses on the relationship between a foreign woman and a dog, told from both points of view; the first one is inspired by the mysterious fate of the Norse settlements in Greenland, which disappeared without a trace during the 15th century; it offers the reader a fictional account of the life of a Kollgrim Asgeirsson, the last Norwegian from the original Greenland colonies, sharing a destiny of solitude—and eventually death—with a goat. At the outset of her journey, Vinci is taken up with a vision of her destination as a place where human survival is impossible: the chapter is introduced by an extract from the *Völuspá*, which enumerates the signs that announce the *Ragnarök*; further on, in the first fictional interlude, Kollgrim recalls another stanza from the *Völuspá*, this time from the first part of the poem, describing the *Ginnungagap*, the “yawning void” which in Norse cosmogony predated the Universe. Iceland and Greenland tend thus to be described as not only spaces beyond place, but even beyond time: both a space that predates creation (“un vuoto aperto, come all’inizio dei tempi”, “a yawning void, like at the beginning of time”)<sup>40</sup> and an apocalyptic environment, where human existence and its traces are precarious to say the least: “qui convivono passato e futuro, e in mezzo ci sta il presente. Un po’ confuso, a dire la verità” (“Here past and future coexist, and in the middle is the present. A bit confused, to tell the truth”).<sup>41</sup>

### *The sublime North*

Icelandic and Greenlandic nature is so different from what our narrators from the South are accustomed to no spatial or temporal coordinate seems to help them make sense of it. Manganelli, for instance, writes: “Non si può percorrere l’Islanda con i criteri culturali con cui si può indagare un qualunque paese europeo” (“You cannot travel through Iceland with the cultural criteria you can use to investigate any other European country”).<sup>42</sup> If, in Leopardi’s *Moral Fable* the Icelander and Nature are at least able to enter a dialogue, Manganelli depicts any encounter with Nordic nature as destined to fail. Both he and Vinci tend to describe

<sup>38</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 48.

<sup>41</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Terra estrema” (1978), in *L’isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 60.

their encounters with the nature of the Far North in a fashion that brings to mind the concept of the sublime. If in the Romantic sense the sublime is mostly associated with feelings of terror and threat—Edmund Burke’s “delightful horror”<sup>43</sup>—already in Kant’s definition a certain emphasis is put on the unboundedness of the sublime object:

The sublime, in other words, refers to things which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form. [...] Our ability to discern boundaries or spatial or temporal limitations is brought into question by the sublime.<sup>44</sup>

Postmodern redefinitions of the sublime tend to stress the connection between the sublime and the idea of unrepresentability. Especially Jean-François Lyotard, drawing on Kant’s discussion, ties the feeling of the sublime with matters of formlessness; the sublime derives from a breaking down of the categories by which we find orientation in time and space, by the perception of the failure of thought and representation to make sense of nature:

In sublime feeling, nature no longer ‘speaks’ to thought in the ‘coded writing’ of its forms. Above and beyond the formal qualities that induced the quality of taste, thinking grasped by the sublime feeling is faced, ‘in’ nature, with quantities capable only of suggesting a magnitude or force that exceeds its power of presentation. This powerlessness makes thinking deaf or blind to natural beauty.<sup>45</sup>

In Vinci and Manganelli’s case, this failure of presentation is especially a failure of language; their language is found incapable of describing what they see, of capturing the essence of the Icelandic panorama; on its part, Icelandic nature is portrayed as so completely indifferent to humans that it refuses to have any kind of meaning attached: Manganelli repeatedly describes it as a pure signifier, as raw material existence that resists any kind of symbolization.

Quello che vedo ai due lati della strada non è paesaggio, non è natura. Qualcosa di assolutamente indifferente all’uomo, di atemporale [...] Sono di fronte a qualcosa che non si cura di esser visto, che rifiuta lo spettatore, un gigantesco cadavere pietrificato di cosa del tutto irriconoscibile. In quel mondo scostante, quelle forme discontinue, riconosco una qualità rara: la grandezza, il rifiuto della “misura umana”, l’indifferenza a farsi capire, la brutalità stranamente accoppiata allo stile.<sup>46</sup>

(What I see on the sides of the road is not landscape, it is not nature. It is something absolutely indifferent to mankind, atemporal [...] I find myself before something that does not care about being seen, that rejects its spectator, a gigantic, petrified corpse of an unrecognisable thing. In that brusque world, in those discontinuous shapes, I recognize a rare quality: the grandeur, the refusal of a “human measure”, the indifference to being understood, the brutality, oddly coupled with style.)

<sup>43</sup> Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, London & New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, transl. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 52.

<sup>46</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “Indifferente all’uomo” (1978), in *L’isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 51.

Once again, the concepts of place and space—and the related idea of landscape—play a relevant role in Manganelli’s discourse on the unrepresentability of Icelandic nature; Eric Hirsch, discussing the idea of landscape in anthropology, defines it as a “framing convention” for the outsider and as “the meaning imputed by local people to their cultural and physical surroundings”.<sup>47</sup> In both its meanings, landscape entails the idea of a portion of nature excised by human intervention from its original space and put back into place according to human cultural coordinates: “Land becomes landscape out of an act of scission.”<sup>48</sup> The idea of landscape, continues Hirsch, foregrounds matters of representability; be it through painting or literary description, representing a landscape means framing a portion of land so that it makes sense for the human subject, while, at the same time, interventions such as landscape gardening aim at bringing nature closer to an ideal: “the goal [is] to achieve a correspondence between the pictorial ideal and the countryside itself.”<sup>49</sup> The Nordic wilderness, as described by Vinci and Manganelli, is on the contrary a land that refuses to be given any meaning, that resists any attempt to frame it into a landscape. In one of his texts about Iceland, Manganelli writes:

Mi rifiuto di chiamare “natura” la drammatica bellezza della terra islandese. La parola “natura” mi pare alludere a qualcosa di inserito in una cultura, qualcosa che esige e deliba poesia e confidenze sentimentali. Niente di simile nella terra d’Islanda, che esegue le sue fantasie nella assoluta indifferenza verso le reazioni emotive degli uomini.<sup>50</sup>

(I refuse to call the dramatic beauty of the Icelandic countryside “nature”. The word “nature”, it seems to me, evokes something placed within a culture, something that requires and savours poetry and sentimental secrets. Nothing of the sort in the Icelandic countryside: it carries out its fantasies in complete indifference to the emotional reactions of men.)

Vinci has the same revelation that Manganelli has: in the Far North nature transcends the limits of human symbolization and signification; the experience deeply changes the way in which she sees the world and, towards the end of her memoir, she extends Manganelli’s realization well beyond the borders of the North: through the rite of immersion in the “bellezza sconvolgente e zitta” (“upsetting and silent beauty”) and the “sublime insondabile” (“unfathomable sublime”)<sup>51</sup> of Greenland, Vinci comes to the realization of the unbridgeable gulf that separates mankind and nature: “Il mondo non è un panorama”.<sup>52</sup>

Both Vinci and Manganelli are deeply concerned with a metaliterary reflection on the (im)possibility of writing about space. Their exploration of otherness is not only guided by the nostalgic attitude which, according to Debbie Lisle, pervades contemporary travel writing: “a desire to [...] rediscover the authenticity of elsewhere”,<sup>53</sup> a quest for a place that can be unequivocally tied to the past, both a dream of a bygone Golden Age

<sup>47</sup> Eric Hirsch, “Landscape: Between Place and Space”, in Eric Hirsch & Michael O’Hanlon (eds.), *The Anthropology of Landscape. Perspectives on Place and Space*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Sabina Sestigiani, *Writing Colonisation. Violence, Landscape, and the Act of Naming in Modern Italian and Australian Literature*, New York: Peter Lang, 2014, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Hirsch, “Landscape: Between Place and Space”, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Giorgio Manganelli, “L’isola pianeta” (1982), in *L’isola pianeta e altri settentrioni*, 2006, p. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 196.

<sup>52</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 216.

<sup>53</sup> Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 24. See also pp. 203-259.

and an inspiration for a possibile, future Utopia. In the texts at hands, going North does not only mean rediscovering one's authentic self, it also means questioning the place of mankind in the world and the means by which men discuss their relation to nature. What these writers really appear to be longing after is an authentic language which allows them to fully grasp the essence of the nature they have encountered; such a language, however, does not seem to exist.

In his essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" (1984), Lyotard once again puts the issue of indeterminacy at the core of the (contemporary) concept of the sublime, focusing on matters of pictorial representation: the inherent sublimity of avant-garde art resides, according to Lyotard, in the fact that it bears witness to inexpressible.<sup>54</sup> In "Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism?" (1982) Lyotard defines modern art as that which "present[s] the fact that the unrepresentable exists": referring back to Kant's idea of the sublime as something which has to do with "formlessness" and "abstraction", Lyotard writes that a modern work of art "will of course 'present' something though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be 'white' like one of Malevitch's squares; it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain."<sup>55</sup>

Towards the end of her trip, Vinci describes how her gaze has significantly changed, as if the white of Greenland was contagious ("i miei occhi avevano dimenticato il colore dell'erba", "my eyes had forgotten the colour of the grass").<sup>56</sup> She then inserts a quote from Derek Jarman's film *Wittgenstein*, telling the story of a young man who wants to reduce the world to pure logic, creating a whole landscape of ice; however, he forgets about friction, so that this pure world is impossible to walk upon. Though the clever young man learns to appreciate the idea of the rough ground, the anecdote ends with an image of nostalgia and homelessness: "Something in him was still homesick for the ice, where everything was radiant and absolute and relentless. [...] So now he was marooned between earth and ice, at home in neither."<sup>57</sup>

The destination of Vinci's journey seems to be the realisation of a deeper, existential homelessness that no place of Earth can heal; the image of a world of pure ice and abstraction, while signaling quite explicitly the utopian character of Vinci's description of Greenland, brings us back to the beginning of her book: to the blank page that becomes the most accurate map of Greenland. This map, with hindsight, does not stand merely in opposition to the other, scientific and detailed map; it also appears as a page without words, in stark opposition to the travelogue itself; the whiteout Vinci experienced in Greenland seems to loom even on her writing, 'infecting' the text itself, opening an empty space where the unrepresentable is allowed to emerge.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", in *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, transl. Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 89-107.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism?", transl. Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, pp. 215-216.

<sup>57</sup> Terry Eagleton & Derek Jarman, *Wittgenstein: The Terry Eagleton Script, the Derek Jarman Film*, London: The British Film Institute, 1993, p. 142. Quoted in Simona Vinci, *Nel bianco*, 2009, p. 215.

### Conclusions

As I hopefully have shown, these contemporary literary depictions of the North as seen from Italy make abundant use of an ideological frame partly derived from Romanticism, which sees Scandinavia as a place still dominated by nature, and still in touch with a remote past. To go back to the categories listed by Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, one can conclude that these representations of Scandinavia draw heavily both on the “Utopian North” and the “Historical North” traditions, while also picturing it as a place of freedom and self-discovery, as is common in the “Creative North” stereotype. The four works under scrutiny, and especially Manganelli’s and Vinci’s, also make use of images that belong to the category of the sublime; however, the emphasis put on issues of representability and on the liminal, indefinable character of Nordic nature brings us closer to a postmodernist conception of the sublime rather than to its traditional, Romantic one. The Far North is always a place of radical otherness, which can never be fully understood, let alone represented.

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