

Henning Wærp: Arktisk litteratur. Fra Fridtjof Nansen til Anne B. Ragde

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Is there an Arctic regional identity, and if so, what is (and has been) the role of literary texts in constructing and changing it? This seems to be the main underlying question behind Henning Wærp's book *Arktisk litteratur* (*Arctic literature*), even though the author himself does not formulate it exactly this way.

Arktisk litteratur is subdivided into four parts. After part one, which delivers a brief introduction to different definitions and views of the Arctic, follows a part dedicated to readings of nonfictional accounts of Arctic journeys. It is structured chronologically, starting with Fridtjov Nansen's *På ski over Grønland* (1890) and ending with Bea Uusma's *Expeditionen. Min kärlekshistoria* (2013). One of the recurring questions that Wærp asks here is which qualities Arctic expedition reports must have to become and remain worth reading, thus trying to explain the enduring popularity of some of the analyzed texts (such as Nansen's) and the public oblivion of others (such as Roald Amundsen's and Otto Sverdrup's). Wærp's answer is that features such as personal conflicts, dramatical episodes, descriptions of nature, of encounters with other cultures and the mapping of new land play a key role in this respect. Yet, of equal importance seems to be that even texts that are presented as docu-

mentary literature demonstrate qualities otherwise considered typical for literary fiction, such as narrativity and the use of literary devices such as metaphors, personification and suspense. The book's third (and shortest) part is not guided by a focus on genre, but on a particular motif, namely that of the polar bear and the way it appears in a broad variety of texts from such different categories as hunting stories, crime fiction and children's and young adult literature. Wærp's readings in this part are inspired by the field of cultural animal studies, and his main focus is on the anthropomorphization of polar bears in the texts, which he sees as an ambivalent literary strategy: on the one hand enabling identification, but on the other hand risking the projection of human emotions and normative perspectives onto another species. The fourth and last part of Wærp's book focuses on poetry and novels that relate to the Arctic in one way or another, starting with Petter Dass' *Nordlands Trompet* and ending with a chapter on northern Norwegian trading posts as a setting in late nineteenth to late twentieth century novels. The overarching focus in this part is on the role of place in literary fiction, which according to Wærp has so far been undervalued, despite its vital importance at least for texts that relate to the Arctic region.

It needs to be said that the above summary only reflects my own understanding of Wærp's book, and that it runs the risk of not conveying an adequate impression of the latter's content, which is much more diverse than my description implies. This diversity is at the same time one of the book's major shortcomings: There is no explicit, overarching research question, no elaborated theoretical approach, and the book ends without any form of conclusion. Wærp's explanation for this incoherency is that the term *Arctic* is too complex to allow for a general reasoning that would connect all the book's chapters (15). However, the impression one gets as a reader is that the book's fragmented character is not so much down to the term *Arctic*, but is rather due to the book being – to a considerable extent – an assemblage of individual studies that had previously been published in the form of articles, and which are now reprinted with little attempt to connect them to each other. As a result, while each of the book's chapters makes for interesting reading by itself, one cannot help but wonder why the chapters in their entirety were put together and published in the form of a book.

This conceptual weakness is already apparent in the introductory chapters. As Wærp notes here, there are mainly two differing definitions of the Arctic: a relatively simple one regarding everything north of the polar circle (at 66° 33') as Arctic, and the 10 °C isotherm, which takes climatic and vegetational aspects into consideration. Following the first definition, the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland would belong to the Arctic, while according to the latter, only small parts of northernmost Norway could be considered as Arctic. Wærp does not, however, make it clear how *he* defines the Arctic for the purpose of his book. The only hints he gives are that, in his opinion, the whole of northern Norway is part of the Arctic (15), and that there is no generally accepted southern border for the Arctic (39). This makes it possible for Wærp to consider as “Arctic” even regions that lie *south* of the polar circle and thus outside of both conventional definitions of the Arctic region. While this may be in accordance with recent political language use (as in the Norwegian government's *nordområdestrategi*), it also means equating the Arctic with “the North” and thus risking depriving the term of meaning. The fact that Wærp (without further comment) includes a text such as Amundsen's *Sydpolen* (*The South Pole*) in his discussion of

“Arctic” literature is an indication of the vagueness with which the term is used in his book.

I also must admit that, after having read the book, it still remains unclear to me what “Arctic literature” is (or could be), and there is no elaborate reflection on this to be found anywhere in the book. Is it literature *about* the Arctic or literature written *in* the Arctic? Wærp declares “voices from the Nordic Arctic” (“stemmene ifra det nordiske Arktis”, 30) to be the subject of his book, yet a considerable number of the texts in his selection stems from writers who – at best – were temporary visitors to the Arctic, not “inhabitants”. That Wærp limits his selection to texts from Finland, Norway and Sweden is certainly legitimate, even though it makes the book’s title somewhat misleading (as it would lead one to expect a study of literature from the entire Arctic region). More problematic is that there is not a single mention of any text from Sami literature. Wærp does not even care to explain this complete absence, which can only appear as rather strange in a book on the topic of “Arctic literature”.

If there is one recurrent aspect that connects the book’s individual chapters, at least to some extent, then it is the focus on literary representations of “nature” in the meaning of the non-human environment. Considering the immense environmental and climatic changes affecting the Arctic today, this may seem a particularly suitable focus for a book on Arctic literature. Despite its remoteness from most of the world’s industrial centers, the Arctic is not only heavily polluted, having been called the region with “the world’s most severe toxic contamination” (*Silent Snow. The Slow Poisoning of the Arctic*, Marla Cone 2005, 2); because of the unequal distribution of the effects of anthropogenic climate change, it is also warming much faster than the rest of the planet, measurable – and indeed very visible – through the rapid decline in the amount of polar sea ice, the receding of glaciers, and the thawing of permafrost soils. Therefore, in recent years, the Arctic has been depicted in the media as a showcase for global environmental change and “as an illustration of Earth having moved into a new geological era that has been called the Anthropocene” (*Media and the Politics of Arctic Climate Change*, Miyase Christensen, Annika E. Nilsson and Nina Wormbs 2013, 164).

Considering this situation, the question arises of how literary texts relate to these immense changes that not only affect Arctic animals and ecosystems, but also the region’s human population. With the polar bear having become one of the most frequently used symbols for the threat of species extinction due to global environmental and climatic change (*Imagining Extinction. The Cultural Meaning of Endangered Species*, Ursula Heise 2016, 238–241), the two chapters dealing with literary representations of the “king of the Arctic” would have provided an opportunity to address this question. However, from Wærp’s selection of texts, one would gain the impression that in contemporary Nordic literature there is a total silence concerning such issues. Even a section explicitly titled “ecological problems” only deals with (mostly older) texts that seem to problematize hunting polar bears out of a concern for animal welfare, not in relation to species extinction due to climate change and pollution. Although Wærp claims that more recent children’s literature propagates a global sense of responsibility in relation to climate and the environment (“en global ansvarsfølelse i forhold til klima og miljø”, 228), this is in no way clear from the examples he discusses.

It seems, in any case, that Wærp does not attribute the greatest ecological significance to children's literature, but instead to idealizing descriptions of Arctic nature and landscapes in the travel reports of Nansen, Helge Ingstad, and Knud Rasmussen. According to Wærp, Nansen's travelogues can be considered examples of "nature writing", and Nansen as the creator of a Nordic pastoral tradition in which the Arctic becomes the idealized "rural" counterpart of a rejected urban modernity. While this is completely plausible, it is less obvious to what extent this Arctic pastoral can fulfill a critical function in the context of contemporary discussions about climate change and overconsumption, as Wærp claims (94). How can the "immutability that also appeases the human" ("uforanderlighet som bringer også mennesket til ro", 171) in Nansen's descriptions of Arctic landscapes and the wish "to escape from modernity" ("å unnslipe moderniteten", 171) that characterizes the polar expeditions of his time be brought into accord with a contemporary reality of human-made, rapid environmental and climatic change affecting the Arctic more than any other region on the planet? Does the "Arctic pastoral" today indeed fulfill the critical function that Wærp attests to it, or does it not rather serve the tourism industry in the promotion of travels to the Arctic that may be inspired by a contempt for modernity, but that in themselves are very unlikely to contribute to ecological sustainability? The assumption that literary representations of "nature" and a focus on the category of "place" would automatically create greater environmental awareness and changed behavior was typical for much of the ecocriticism of the 1990s. Yet, as more recent ecocritical studies have shown, this assumption is not necessarily valid, and a focus on local "nature" can even lead to escapism and ignorance towards the global dimension and the interconnectedness of most contemporary environmental issues (*Sense of Place and Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Ursula Heise 2008, 17–67). A more problematizing discussion of the role of literary representations of the Arctic environment might therefore yield more interesting insights than a simple adoption of Nansen's critique of modernity.

That is not to say that the focus on place in *Arktisk litteratur* is unproductive. Wærp succeeds well in demonstrating that the Arctic is not a random and exchangeable setting in, for example, some of the novels of Cora Sandel, but rather fulfills essential narrative functions. Some of the book's most interesting chapters are those dealing with lesser-known texts set in Arctic environments, such as Lars Hansen's so-called "polar sea novels". Published between 1926 and 1944, these works are essentially forgotten today, but enjoyed considerable popularity at that time. Wærp's discussion of these novels shows that the Arctic setting in them served ideological purposes that were very much bound to nationalistic discourses from that particular period. After the Second World War, these discourses lost their political relevance, which (together with the – according to Wærp – dubious literary qualities of Larsen's novels) explains the short life span of the polar sea novel as a genre.

The fragmented character of *Arktisk litteratur* and the lack of both a clearly formulated research question and of any form of conclusion make it difficult to arrive at an overall judgement about the book. It is only seldom that Wærp, following his analyses of literary texts, proposes a broader thesis, and in the few cases where he does so, these are not always convincing. His claim that *Nordlands Trompet* constitutes the expression of an Arctic identity ("arktisk identitet", 241) reaching back to the Viking Age seems to me to stand on relatively shaky ground, at least as long as Wærp does not make it clear what characterizes this

identity. But maybe the book's incoherency itself is an indication that an Arctic identity, if it existed, would be composed of a variety of differing and at times contradictory elements, which, moreover, would be subject to change over time.

It remains somewhat unclear to me who is the intended audience for *Arktisk litteratur*. Literary scholars are likely to find the conceptual weaknesses and the lack of in-depth literary analysis somewhat frustrating. A more generally literature-interested audience, in contrast, could probably do without the many references to research literature. However, Wærp's style of writing is very clear, and he presents his material in an easy to understand way. He contextualizes very broadly and thus conveys a lot of background knowledge concerning the works of literature that he discusses. *Arktisk litteratur* may therefore indeed appeal to a generally interested reader who is curious about what characterizes literature from (or about) the Arctic.