

British Perceptions of Nordic Peripheries: An Historical Survey

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Abstract

This article offers an historical overview of the various stages and varying significance of the impact of Nordic literature in Britain, from the late 1500s up to Modernism, and a tentative evaluation of the situation over the last hundred years. It focuses especially on the revival of the ancient literature of the North, and how this came to be adopted within the British literary tradition, in, for instance, such genres as the Gothic and the historical novel. The article also emphasises how British travel in the nineteenth century renewed this interest, but created a sentimental perception of the Nordic countries that caused considerable problems the moment these countries, while being perceived as a periphery, brought out a new and avant-garde literature in the late nineteenth century. The focus is thus on British-Nordic literary relations as an interesting example of the tensions between stereotyped ideas of centre and periphery.

Keywords

Anglo-Nordic relations, centre, periphery, sagas, Modernism

It is difficult to point out a considerable number of Nordic writers who have exerted a profound and explicit influence on writers from the British Isles. The name that immediately comes to mind is Henrik Ibsen, whose influence on a number of authors and on the theatre in general is beyond doubt, but other major names are less self-evident. Still, the North and the culture of the Nordic countries have exerted a profound impact on British culture; indeed, British culture and literature as such contain a northern or Nordic element that constitutes an important aspect of its identity. The following is an attempt to explore this apparent paradox. What is the history of this Nordic element? When did it first have an impact on the British cultural scene? In what areas did it manifest itself? Who are its most important proponents? Also: is it possible to consider the literary scene in isolation, or is it necessary to include a wider cultural horizon to acquire a meaningful perspective? As will emerge from the attempt to answer these questions, this is a story in which the assumed centres and peripheries do not always play their expected roles. On the contrary, one of the striking characteristics of this relationship is the extent to which the assumed centre tends to resist progressive and innovative ideas coming precisely from the periphery. But it is also a story in which the very definition of centre and periphery may vary with time and place: one centre may, for instance, very well be perceived as another centre's periphery; similarly, a centre may in the course of time become a periphery, and a periphery may become a centre. The dynamic between centre and periphery, in other words, is not necessarily a stable and predictable phenomenon.

British culture: southern and central

Nevertheless, British culture has been and still remains a profoundly centralised phenomenon, in the sense that the capital, London, has always played an overwhelmingly significant role as the locus that anyone who wanted to make his/her mark would have to gravitate towards and work from. Like a giant magnet, London has thus exerted a profoundly centripetal force, which has been applicable not just to England, but also to Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Somehow, the ancient academic satellites of Oxford and Cambridge, neither of them

more than a hundred kilometres from London, have only confirmed this general tendency. As an example, anyone who has worked on or written about virtually any aspect of British art, literature or history and has, in the process, compiled a bibliography of primary and secondary literature, from any period, will have realised that ‘place of publication’ is either London, Oxford or Cambridge in all but a small minority of cases. Thus, the London region, placed in the south of England, has always represented the cultural centre of gravity in the British Isles, a fact further reinforced by the region’s parallel role in the field of politics.

Furthermore, from the time of William the Conqueror, British political, commercial and cultural interests abroad have generally been directed across the Channel, and from there towards the central and southern parts of the Continent. Even for a long time after the Reformation, the powers that challenged Britain’s growing significance were primarily found in the Catholic countries bordering on the Mediterranean, and the enduring importance of Greek and Roman Classicism ensured that such a phenomenon as the Grand Tour, for instance, was almost invariably associated with the South. In this context, as well as in several others, the mid-eighteenth century seems to provide a convenient dividing line, after which the picture changes rather dramatically.

The period before 1750

But even well before 1750, an incipient British nationalism was beginning to look in a different direction, i.e. to the North, for inspiration.¹ Such major works as William Warner’s historical poem *Albion’s England* (1586) and William Camden’s giant topographical and historical work *Britannia* (Latin ed. 1586; English ed. 1610), both designed to build a sense of English or British identity, showed a strong awareness that the roots of the nation were also to be found across the North Sea. In her now eighty-year-old study, *Literary Relations of England and Scandinavia in the Seventeenth Century* (1935), Ethel Seaton offers a brilliant presentation of how this awareness encompassed an interest in the language of Old Norse as well as in the literary tradition of the

sagas, both of which would have a profound impact on the British literary consciousness. She calls particular attention to the publication in Copenhagen in 1665 of the *Younger Edda*, together with major parts of the *Elder Edda*, in an edition with parallel texts in Old Norse, Danish and Latin: 'The first great change in knowledge of northern mythology was made by [this] publication. [...] This is the clear landmark in English exploration of northern myth' (Seaton 1935: 247–8). But she also emphasises the significance of the Dane Peder Hansen Resen's publication of the dictionary *Lexicon Islandicum* (1683, written by the late Icelander Guðmundur Andrússon) and the Englishman George Hickes's *Grammatica Anglo-Saxonica et Moseo-Gothica* (1689), claiming that with these works 'the Septentrionalists were equipped for the study of the ancient northern languages' (Ibid., 231).²

This area of study was increasingly confined to the universities, and in Britain, Oxford came to play a leading role in building this academic platform from which future generations would profit. The result was that during the quarter-century up to 1715, a range of important grammars and dictionaries were produced, although it should also be underlined that as most of this material was produced in Latin, both in Britain and other countries, it all amounted to a large collaborative effort across Northern Europe. This obviously also meant that major works produced in Scandinavia were immediately accessible to a British readership as long as they were written in Latin. One writer representing this tradition was the Icelander turned Norwegian, Tormod Torfæus (1636–1719), who produced several historical works, including the four-volume *Historia rerum Norvegicarum* in 1711.

Gradually, this academic groundwork was also beginning to have an impact on literature, and initially on poetry. To start with, however, writers distinguished only vaguely between Nordic, Anglo-Saxon and other impulses. In Sir Richard Blackmore's (1654–1729) poem *Prince Arthur: An Heroick Poem* (1695), for instance, the Norse god Thor is placed side by side with Lucifer, and is thus given a role very similar to that of Beelzebub in a passage very clearly influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*. At this stage, too, the Nordic element is almost invariably connected with a stereotyped view of the North in general as a primitive and even infernal place. This was soon to change, however,

and in *Alfred: An Epick Poem* from 1723, the same poet provides a concluding scene where the hero of the Saxon king marries the Danish princess Elfitha, 'Whose lovely Form and Qualities divine / To my admiring Eyes unrivall'd shine' (Blackmore 1723: 447). Examples such as this, which treat the Nordic heritage as a cultural asset, even to British royals, could perhaps be seen as a revival of old Viking connections; this sanctioning of an Anglo-Nordic bond had also been demonstrated by the choice of Danish partners for King James VI of Scotland (later James I of England) in 1589 and the future Queen Anne in 1683. A similar celebration of northern qualities, at the expense of those of the South, is found in such works as *The Seasons* (1726–1730) and *Liberty: A Poem* (1735–1736) by the Scottish poet James Thomson (1700–1748). In the latter work, Thomson sees the violent influx of the Vikings as contributing positively to the fact that 'the rich tide of English blood grew full' (Thomson 1774: 106).

Thus the 'Nordic element' discussed in the present article is fundamentally associated with the heyday of the Vikings, who, despite being intruders, laid the foundation of a heroic and century-old tradition within British literature and culture. As a result, the so-called Septentrionalists represented a network that bound the Anglo-Nordic world together, seeing it essentially as one unified cultural region. Therefore, this is also the background against which it is necessary to see the more radical changes that were taking place from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.

The second half of the eighteenth century

Possibly the most important Nordic cultural influence in Britain in the second half of the century was the work of the young Swiss professor of *belles lettres* in Copenhagen, Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807), whose Danish history, published in French in 1755 as *Introduction à l'Histoire du Danemarch*, made use of modern scholarship as well as ancient sources to raise the reputation of the ancient Scandinavian culture, and effectively present it as fully compatible with that of the South. Mallet's history, together with his *Monuments de la Mythologie et la Poesie des Celtes* from the following year, attracted considerable

interest, not least in England, where it was translated in 1770 as *Northern Antiquities* by Bishop Thomas Percy (1729–1811), who had already published *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) and *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). But Percy not only translated Mallet's work. As was quite common at the time, Mallet had – as the title of his second work suggests – hardly bothered to distinguish between the Germanic (Scandinavian and German) and the Celtic element in his work. A consequence of this was that the Gauls were included in the hazy and more or less interchangeable terms Celtic, German(ic) and Nordic. Percy, however, made sure that the French were excluded from the elite company of the northerners. Mallet/Percy gave a considerable impetus to the awareness of Nordic culture in Britain, and it is hardly a coincidence that a man like Joseph Banks, the godfather-to-be of British science, during his visit to Iceland two years after the publication of Percy's translation, returned from the country with one hundred and sixty-two early printed books and old manuscripts.

Bishop Percy, however, was not the only major representative of the legacy from Mallet. Thomas Gray (1716–71), who perhaps more than any other poet marked the transition from Neoclassical to Romantic themes, exerted a powerful influence on the future generation of poets, not least by showing a considerable interest in the old Scandinavian and Icelandic literature, an interest that also involved an interest in the sublime natural landscapes of the North. With an ode like 'The Progress of Poesy' (1754), whose publication the year before Mallet's first work confirms that Gray was already deeply engaged in the topic, he underlines precisely the cultural value of so-called barbaric poetry. Other odes like 'The Descent of Odin' and 'The Fatal Sisters' (written in 1761) are similarly the results of his prolonged investigations into what in the mid-eighteenth century must have been regarded as an alternative literary tradition.

An even more important event around the same time, however, was the publication in Edinburgh of the tiny volume entitled *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760), which would initiate a literary wave with far-reaching consequences, especially for the development of Romantic literature. Although the author, James Macpherson (1736–1796), claimed that the poems of Ossian were translations of ancient Gaelic

poetry, written down from oral sources in the Scottish Highlands, the texts not only concerned relations in the mythical past between the British Isles and Scandinavia; they also launched a European obsession with the northern landscape, based on the awareness that was already in place. In this way, they gave further impetus to the respect with which the ancient literary traditions of the North were received in Britain.

Thus Nordic literature, which for a long time had been perceived as a fringe phenomenon belonging to a remote cultural periphery, was gradually making its way onto the established literary scene, by way of cultural import as well as the work of the so-called Septentrionalists within the British cultural scene itself. To give a simplified account of the literary transformation that takes place from the mid-1700s until the early 1800s, one may, in other words, claim that this is the overriding focus of the whole Romantic movement: a steadily increasing attention to literary and cultural impulses associated with the periphery at the expense of those associated with the urban centres.³ Romanticism is precisely characterised by the discovery, in cultural terms, of the people (i.e. the large and as yet culturally non-existent majority) as well as of the people's past, and both of these had their primary anchorage in the periphery, i.e. away from the elitist centres. Thus, periphery, primitivism and remoteness from court and capital were associated with the genuine and the truthful, and from the point of view of the British, who were already traversing the world's oceans, nothing seemed to appear as more remote and peripheral than the icy North, of which the Nordic countries were perceived as a natural part.

It is against this background that the late eighteenth century develops the genre of Gothic fiction, which in itself is an affirmation of northern values and a powerful critique, and sometimes a downright caricature, of a soft, superstitious and centralised Catholic culture. Being primarily concerned with a geography that is almost excessively peripheral – ruined castles situated in remote and inaccessible regions – the Gothic inverts the old relationship between the civilised South and the primitive North, the latter making a self-confident claim of literary independence from the former.⁴ This is partly the basis on which an author like Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), who appropriately was born

only a fortnight after the death of Thomas Gray, in the early part of the nineteenth century takes the new genre of the eighteenth century – the novel – into new territory. By combining the contemporary interest in the past, and especially the national past, with the culture and the landscape of the northern periphery, Scott invents the historical novel, thereby building a bridge that further facilitates the cultural exchange across the North Sea.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance for European literary history of such purveyors of the northern literary heritage as James Macpherson and Sir Walter Scott. As documented by *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (2004), edited by Howard Gaskill, the Ossian poems not only exerted a profound impact on *literary* culture; they also set an entire mood within a range of other art forms, and largely defined the preoccupations of poets, painters and composers across Europe for the next two or three generations. Similarly, Scott, according to one of his biographers, opened up the past to ‘the serious historians, the novelists and romancers, and the architects’, besides inspiring a thousand paintings and fifty operas (Wilson 1989: 153 and 3). The injection of impulses from these artists, of which a sense of northernness was a vital ingredient, provided in other words for the first time a climate in which the North was no longer seen solely as a passive receiver of external and superior impulses, but as an active contributor to a common European culture.

Nordic travel and arctic exploration

This gradual opening up of the cultural doors to allow an influx of impulses from the Nordic countries to Britain, in short a curiosity for everything Nordic, also manifests itself in the wave of British travellers to these countries, especially Iceland and Norway, from the 1820s onwards.⁵ Admittedly, the arrival of the so-called salmon lords, and later a variety of other travellers, was partly due to the opening up of European borders after decades of wars and embargoes; partly it was also due to a new awareness of wild scenery, to which the aesthetics of the sublime had contributed. On the other hand, one should not underestimate the literary groundwork conducted by the

Septentrionalists and their followers over more than two centuries. Regardless of which explanation one prefers to emphasise, the fact remains that in the course of the nineteenth century, the British turned to the Nordic countries, finding qualities that clearly satisfied some fundamental needs among a people who at the time represented the spearhead of industry, technology and civilisation. Perhaps it is also possible to see the British reception of Hans Christian Andersen as part of this general picture; with a rather instinctive precision, Andersen himself chose the term 'fairy tale' for what was essentially a more modern, literary and original form than the traditional, oral and authorless genre of the fairy tale. Nevertheless, and possibly because he succeeded in establishing this connection at a strategically convenient moment, Andersen came to epitomise the British perception of the Nordic countries as simple, charming and innocent – qualities that were generally associated with folk culture, and that in no way challenged a British sense of cultural superiority.

As is shown in Andrew Wawn's important study *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000), the Victorian fascination with everything Nordic was indistinguishable from this cultural background. And importantly, these impulses were flowing both ways across the North Sea. In the course of a few decades, this represented a major change. The first edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from 1771 had provided an excessively short entry on Norway, which after a sentence or two on the position of the country on the map, ended with the following bleak statement: 'It is a cold barren country, subject to Denmark' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1st ed. 1768–1771, s.v. 'Norway'). Then, from the 1820s to the end of the century, British travellers produced nearly two hundred travel accounts from the country. At the same time a considerable number of British writers of popular fiction – such as Harriet Martineau, Edna Lyall, Durham Griffith and Marie Corelli – published works that catered to this fascination with everything Scandinavian; they were works that drew on the northern scenery and the literary and historical tradition of the Vikings, while at the same time underlining the simplicity and honesty of the native population. The result was almost invariably a portrait of a Scandinavia that represented a moral innocence that had somehow gone missing in the harsher realities of modern Britain.

A major literary sideline that also deserves to be mentioned in this context, and that served to underline the literary and cultural bond between Britain and Scandinavia, especially in the nineteenth century, was connected to the intense exploration of the Arctic, which represented a common northern 'backyard' for the whole region. Here, too, there were strong literary foundations to build on; arctic exploration consistently looked back to the Viking Age, when the northern seas had been a highway that linked Britain, the Nordic countries and their arctic colonies, and thus to the sagas themselves. As a result, exploration accounts as well as the massive supply of heroic popular fiction set in the Arctic made constant use of this connection.

It is partly against this background that one of the most interesting and influential figures of the Victorian period, William Morris, ought to be considered. Morris was a breathtakingly versatile man, who left his mark in a whole spectrum of areas, but perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he made an enormous effort to make the saga material, which he called 'the great Story of the North', available to the general reader, in the form of prose and verse translations as well as his own poetry and fiction. Largely thanks to Morris, who again based himself on an old tradition, the British sense of identity, which was largely constructed during the imperial heyday of the late Victorian period, was infused with the spirit of the sagas, or rather with the spirit of the popular perception of the sagas.

But Morris is also interesting as a transitional figure, because to some extent he personifies the traditional British perception of the Nordic countries, and at the same time stands, at the end of the century, on the threshold to a new and very different era. For the British and for Morris, not least because of its powerful association with the saga tradition, the natural, cultural and literary world of the North represented, as suggested above, a set of values that were in the sharpest possible contrast to that of contemporary Britain. Morris himself was very clear in his view of the society in which he lived: 'The leading passion of my life [...] has been and is hatred of modern civilisation' (quoted by David Leopold in Morris 2009: viii). The North, then, represented everything that the technologically advanced, progressive, urban and centralised culture of Victorian Britain did not.

Again, the dichotomy between centre and periphery provides an explanatory key: the centre, according to Morris, whose vision was essentially green or ecological in character, was heading for disaster. Although an ardent Socialist in the latter part of his career, Morris had a completely different view of the direction the ideology of his heart ought to take. Rather than the course eventually taken, namely that of technological progress (which, incidentally, was also the course of Socialism's class enemy), Morris saw the only solution in a development towards a *preindustrial* order, whose best contemporary model he found in the least developed of the Nordic countries, i.e. Norway and Iceland. Here, and in the sagas, which he regarded as still formative of the northern way of thinking, was a society, however peripheral in terms of political and economic significance, that could be launched as a genuine alternative to that of Britain, which to the great majority appeared to provide the recipe for the future.

This, then, is the kind of periphery that the Nordic countries represented at the end of the nineteenth century and that became the chief perception of these countries in Britain: an anti-progressive, backward-looking society, consisting of tight-knit, small-scale communities of farmers, fishermen and craftsmen living in close communion with a sublime natural scenery, i.e. the perfect contrast to the polluted mega-concentrations of the industrial urban centres. It was, in short, a world that reflected the ideals of Romanticism, but it was also closely connected with the cultural pessimism of the late nineteenth century, of which Morris was a chief spokesman. Even as early as 1830, authors like Robert Southey and Thomas Babington Macaulay had met head to head in a violent debate, which was to accompany the entire century, about progress and decline. We find, in other words, in the latter decades of the century, that the perception of the Nordic countries enters straight into a profound political and cultural debate in Britain.

A turning of the tables

Against this background, it is all the more interesting to consider the changes that were taking place even as the old giant and fellow

partisan of Morris's, Thomas Carlyle, was publishing one of his last works, *The Early Kings of Norway* (1875), and Morris, in the early 1890s, produced his sequence of novels set in the unspecified northern world of his dreams.⁶ Because while this long-established view of the Nordic countries continued to be made available to the British public, some new and very different signals were beginning to come from the countries across the North Sea. In 1883, George Brandes's *Men of the Modern Breakthrough* introduced the concept of the 'modern', in a collection of portraits of seven contemporary Scandinavian contributors to the literary debate. In the history of European literature, there is no doubt that Brandes's effort pointed to impulses that were destined to have an important influence on the next generation of writers; also, as Brandes's portraits suggested, Scandinavia was suddenly producing a range of authors who deserved international attention. In the course of the 1880s two more major names appeared: August Strindberg and Knut Hamsun.

In Britain, however, the reception of these new Nordic impulses was slow and sometimes surprisingly hesitant. Admittedly, '[u]nadapted Ibsen first appeared on the London stage with *A Doll's House* in 1889', and in March 1891, *Ghosts* 'opened the floodgates to the phenomenon of execration/adulation of Ibsen' (Ewbank 2002: 27). Also, in the same year George Bernard Shaw published his book-length essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, which discusses the playwright as a literary phenomenon and twelve of his plays to date. But as Ewbank indicates, the reception was mixed, to put it mildly. Furthermore, it was late; when the floodgates were opened in 1891, *Ghosts* was ten years old, Ibsen had produced several of his other great plays, and German theatres had been performing his works since 1875. Typically, the reception of Ibsen in Britain was also characterised by a rather ambiguous debate as to his 'provincialism'; conservative critics tried to take the sting out of his radical message by following Matthew Arnold's preference for the cultural centre over the margin, an approach designed to relegate Ibsen to the status of a disorderly, unclassical, and thus essentially uncultivated writer.⁷

The welcome of Strindberg and Hamsun on British soil, on the other hand, was hardly ambiguous. By the time of Ibsen's breakthrough,

Strindberg had published several major works, including the novel *The Red Room* (1879) and the plays *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888), but according to Tore Rem, his access to the British literary and theatre-going public was more or less barred, partly because he found himself in Ibsen's shade (Rem 2004b: 150). In addition, his plays would be so effectively censored by the Lord Chamberlain's Office that it was only well after the First World War that Strindberg would 'slowly be established as the first Modernist of the theatre' (Ibid.: 156).

Hamsun's road to the British literary scene was equally arduous, and his first novel, *Hunger* (1890), illustrates the point. It was to take nearly ten years before it was translated by the author's rather passionate admirer George Egerton (Fjågesund 2009: 66), and when it was eventually published, it was packaged and promoted as a novel of the decadent school, i.e. as a text of a 'morbid' and 'repellent' quality (Rem 2002: 68). Partly as a result of this unpromising debut on the British market, Hamsun would suffer the same fate in Britain as Strindberg; it was only after the Nobel Prize in 1920 that he acquired something of a name, and even then his reputation never came anywhere near that he held on the Continent (Fjågesund 2009: 65-77).

There is no doubt that Britain, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, regarded itself self-confidently as a literary and cultural trendsetter, one reason being simply that it was the undisputed commercial and political centre of the world. Literary Modernism, however, had trouble finding fertile soil in the country. Why was this the case?

The above discussion suggests that the very fact that the earliest impulses of the new movement came from Scandinavia was in itself a decisive factor. First of all, British critics and readers of literature seem to have had a strong and clear-cut perception of what Scandinavia represented, namely a kind of Romantic reservoir of untouched scenery and a heroic past. Furthermore, this perception was closely connected with Britain's own national identity, where the qualities mentioned formed an important ingredient. The image of Scandinavia as a sentimental dream world was utilised as a friendly and innocent, and therefore acceptable, contrast to the smoke-filled, industrialised reality of the time. Any national identity is a mixture of myth and

reality, and the former is as essential as the latter for the identity to acquire a popular appeal. In a society based on incessant and often turbulent progress, Scandinavia was transformed into a haven of peace and harmony.

Into the twentieth century

In addition to and partly as a result of the above, Scandinavia continued rather decisively to be regarded as a periphery, which, despite its ancient greatness, was hardly expected to contribute literary impulses to the leading nation of the world. In such a context, Strindberg's and Hamsun's works did not make sense; on the contrary, they jarred fundamentally with British taste and expectations. Hamsun's *Hunger*, in particular, which, despite the works of Poe, Baudelaire and Dickens, more radically than any other novel portrayed the frightening sense of alienation associated with the modern city, must have been felt directly to undermine the northern myth in the British consciousness. Set in Christiania, the capital of Norway, the novel was almost a contradiction in terms, for the simple reason that urban scenes were incompatible with the notion of what Norway represented. It is not surprising, therefore, that the book was eventually taken on board by a publisher who was 'notorious for his business in rare editions of erotic books' (Rem 2002: 65), and that it would take several decades before it was made available in a more respectable edition. A strongly centralised British literary Establishment, in other words, showed a profound sympathy towards everything Nordic for as long as the cultural impulses coming from the region were compatible with the conservative, if not reactionary, values that had played such an important role in the British nation-building project of the previous century. The moment these impulses, launched from the periphery, proved to be not only avant-garde, but also expressive of a sense of cultural pessimism that frequently implied a criticism of the centre itself, however, the sympathy rapidly evaporated.

In this perspective, it is interesting to take a broad sweep of the kind of literary figures that seem to have dominated in the Nordic literary export to Britain from the decades following the turn of the century.

Again, it is difficult to point to obviously powerful figures capable of leaving a mark comparable to that of Ibsen. From the turn of the last century onwards, one might, in the field of fiction and drama, suggest such Nobel Prize laureates as Selma Lagerlöf, Sigrid Undset, Pär Lagerkvist, Harry Martinsson and Halldór Laxness, but not one of these seems to have acquired a stature that left a mark on the British literary scene. It is obviously difficult to measure or quantify the literary impact of one country or region on another, but if the number of entries in the British Library Catalogue is anything to go by,⁸ it is interesting to note that it is Lagerlöf who has by far the highest number (341), followed by Undset (199). The most popular works by these writers, furthermore, are those that depict – again from a British point of view – a world that echoes that of the sagas and the distant past, but without actively propagating the ideals formerly associated with it. This seems to be the case with Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berling's Saga* (1891; first translated 1898)⁹ as well as Undset's novels set in the Middle Ages, especially the Kristin Lavransdatter trilogy, which has been published in numerous editions since the translation of the first volume in 1922.

Thus, at a time when Hamsun, Strindberg and others were well ahead of the British literary establishment in terms of providing new and revolutionary impulses to the literature of the day, but were generally ignored or dismissed by the same establishment, the Nordic writers representing a more traditional narrative mode received a heartier welcome. However, it seems that proper access to the British Parnassus was more or less impossible to achieve, because even an author like Lagerlöf was not regarded as a real author. As Peter Graves has shown in an article on the author's reception in Britain, she was written off as a 'story-teller', an epithet suggesting 'a writer of an evolutionary lower order, a sort of *homo troglodytes* by comparison with the *homo sapiens* of the novelist' (Graves 1998: 16). Similarly, Graves's research among the diaries, correspondence and other written records of British authors between 1900 and 1940 shows that she is hardly mentioned.

It seems, in other words, that the general attitude of British critics at the time was a continuing insistence on the Nordic countries as more or less void of any literary or intellectual activity worthy of serious consideration. In 1840, the British traveller to Norway William Bilton had

given a rather precise description of the British view of the country's literary and cultural merits in a European context at the beginning of the Victorian period:

If they were swept away from the face of the earth, the Norwegians would leave behind them no monument of human skill, or labour, or intellect, to tell another generation that a great people had so long tenanted the wide extent of Scandinavia. Nature's monuments would indeed still remain. [...] But no work of public utility or ornament [...] no achievement in Science or Literature, wherewith the human mind of one period holds converse with the mind of all times, would exist to excite the regrets and admiration of the future wanderer on these shores. (Bilton 1840: II, 224-5)

Sixty years later, the feeling was very much the same. In a comprehensive discussion of Lagerlöf's writing in the *Edinburgh Review* from 1901, the anonymous critic concludes with a broadside against Scandinavian literature in general that somehow seems to undermine centuries of a carefully developed respect for each other's cultures:

The books produced in Scandinavia necessarily suffer from certain disabilities. In these countries there exists no great classic literature, nor long tradition of letters. [...] At present the languages of all three countries are poor, and their vocabulary is meagre. Then Scandinavian writers are, as a class, lacking in dignity. [...] From drawbacks such as these the Scandinavian fiction recovers much by those qualities we have so often insisted on – its sincerity and candour. These give it a kind of dignity even when it is childish. (quoted in Graves 1998: 11)

More than a hundred years have passed, however, since Ibsen had a highly ambiguous breakthrough on the British stage and nearly as many since Hamsun and Strindberg quite clearly failed to make any significant impact at all: to what extent, then, has the period after the

First World War witnessed a change to the nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century legacy?

Contemporary perspectives

It is not within the scope of the present article to provide a detailed presentation of the role of Nordic literature in Britain in the last hundred years, but some tentative observations may be ventured. At a first glance there seems to be a considerable period after 1918 during which this impact has been smaller, rather than greater, than in the previous century. It might be relevant in this context to mention at least two phenomena on the political scene that may partly explain this development. First, the nineteenth-century fascination with the sagas and the Nordic past was more or less taken over by the extreme right, especially in Germany. This meant, in effect, that an essential element in the British sense of kinship with the North was no longer tenable. On the contrary, it seems that it quickly became necessary silently to suppress it, and the effect of this suppression has been discernible for the rest of the century. Secondly, the celebration of the Viking connection between Britain and the Nordic countries had been an important ingredient in the nationalist ideology of the Empire. In the first decades after the Second World War, however, the British Empire was dismantled, a process that had in reality been underway from the end of the First World War. It is almost as if a wall fell out of the structure that constituted the century-old sense of connection across the North Sea, especially so from the British side, despite the close political connections between Britain and Norway during the War itself.

In this perspective, it may seem necessary to move all the way up to the present day to find a genuinely new trend in terms of a literary export to Britain, and here, too, an explanation may have to be sought in a wider cultural and political context. First of all, the turn of the millennium witnessed an increasing pressure on the European welfare states of the post-War period – a model largely conceived in the Nordic countries. In addition, the environmental issues of a melting polar ice-cap and climate change have meant a radically growing interest

in everything connected with the North and the Arctic. Britain's and the world's focus has, in other words, been pulled northwards, while in an increasingly global world, the traditional dichotomy between cultural centres and peripheries has lost much of its meaning. At the same time, Britain has for several decades, and most recently after the unification of Germany in 1990 and the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997, gone through a difficult process of adjusting itself to the reality of being a middle-sized European power, while its former colonies began their own process of 'writing back'. Simultaneously, the Nordic countries have enjoyed a long period of impressive growth, which has increasingly served to even out the traditional contrasts between themselves and Britain as, respectively, periphery and centre. It may not be a coincidence, therefore, that one of the first Nordic works to succeed on the British market in the 1990s, partly setting the new trend in motion, was Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992; English trans. 1993), which, though essentially a thriller-cum-crime story, also raises post-colonial issues in its exploration of Denmark's relationship to Greenland.

Since then a veritable wave of Nordic crime fiction has flooded the British market, with names such as Stieg Larsson, Jo Nesbø and Arnaldur Indriðason among the most prominent. Despite its primary role as innocent entertainment, crime fiction clearly also implies a certain questioning of fundamental social and political values, and this is perhaps precisely where the Nordic version of the genre has been leading the way ever since the Swedish duo Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö revolutionised Nordic crime fiction.¹⁰ In addition, this wave of popular fiction led the way for, or at least accompanied, a new interest in so-called 'serious fiction', represented by such writers as Per Petterson and Karl Ove Knausgård.¹¹

It seems, in other words, that the interest of today's British reading public in the Nordic countries has a rather different background from that of previous generations. Although the fascination with the Nordic *scenery* to some extent serves as a common denominator, this backdrop has largely lost the romantic and sentimental quality it had for so many years. Instead, and again possibly as a result of the general process of globalisation, the image of Scandinavia in the minds of British readers

is as often of a modern, urban world, as of natural landscapes echoing the aesthetic ideals of the nineteenth century. Also, whereas the frozen and wintry Nordic landscape was formerly associated with a heroic and manly struggle against a hostile environment, this very scenery is now itself surrounded by a sense of environmental apocalypse, as for instance in the Icelandic (later BBC) TV series *Ófærð (Trapped)*.

Does this mean, then, that British readers and critics have finally buried the old stereotypes of a primitive, innocent and fundamentally peripheral North, and has Nordic literature finally acquired a status on a par with that of any other culture? In other words, has the distinction between centre and periphery become obsolete? Or, to phrase the question differently and more provocatively: has Nordic fiction at long last achieved a quality that has attracted the favourable attention of a discriminating British reading public, or has the same reading public finally discovered – literally – its own insularity? It remains an embarrassing fact that the percentage of works being translated into English from other languages remains extremely small. Does this actually mean that it might make sense to turn the question of centre and periphery round, and ask if it is the centre, by virtue of being the centre, that runs the risk of becoming narcissistic and thus narrow-minded and eventually peripheral? After all, peripheries have always been forced to relate to and acquire a knowledge of the centres, but not the other way round.

Such questions open up perspectives that are too complex and wide-ranging to be dealt with here, although such a discussion of a turning of the tables with regard to cultural impulses is typical of major reshuffles of political, economic and cultural power. In conclusion, it might be interesting, however, to ask how Nordic literature generally views itself in relation to the British literary scene. Again, Nordic writers have for at least seventy years, i.e. from the end of the War, found themselves bombarded by a wide range of Anglo-American cultural impulses, to the detriment of those from Germany, France and other major cultures. For the great majority of Nordic writers, therefore, these impulses form a natural part of their literary identity, and in view of the powerful role of the English language in the development of a global literary culture,¹² this tendency is only likely to increase

in the coming years. Nordic authors still do not write their books in English, but it may only be a matter of time before this happens, and at that moment yet another barrier will have been broken. Still, such a development may not necessarily mean a strengthening of *Britain's* position in relation to the cultural field across the North Sea; there is no doubt that *American* impulses have dominated over those from Britain in the post-War period, and from the turn of the millennium, the tendency is more towards a global culture brought to us through the medium of the English language, but probably less and less with a distinctly British cast. Thus, literature written in English is increasingly disconnected from its social, cultural and historical rootedness in Britain itself. In such a scenario, it is obvious that asserting a distinctly Nordic literary voice becomes ever more of a challenge.

Endnotes

¹ For a more comprehensive historical survey of the period leading up to the late nineteenth century, see Fjågesund 2014, although this book has a different overall perspective from that of the present article.

² The term 'Septentrional' means 'of the North'. Etymologically, it refers to the seven stars in the Plough (the Big Dipper), which is part of the constellation Ursa Major.

³ I am not aware that other critics have expressed this particular view of Romanticism; it should therefore be regarded as a general observation, open to debate. It is, however, an important underlying premise in Fjågesund 2014.

⁴ See for instance Baldick 1992: xiv.

⁵ For a full discussion of British travellers in Norway, see Fjågesund and Symes 2003.

⁶ Morris made two extensive visits to Iceland (1871 and 1873). He also visited Norway, ill and exhausted, in 1896, only a couple of months before his death.

⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of Ibsen's provincialism, see Rem 2004a.

⁸ These entries contain work by and about the author, in all languages, including the original.

⁹ There were two translations in 1898; one of them is entitled *The Story of Gösta Berling*. For a full discussion of Lagerlöf's reception in Britain, see Graves 1998.

¹⁰ Barry Forshaw traces the origin of the present wave of Nordic Noir back to the 1970s, in particular to Sjöwall and Wahlöö, and to the 90s figure of Kurt Wallander, by Henning Mankell (Forshaw 2013: 9).

¹¹ At the same time, Jon Fosse, who in the last few years has been 'the most performed European playwright alive', has had major problems achieving a breakthrough on the British stage (*The Independent*, 1 May 2011).

¹² A British bookshop today probably contains a majority of fictional works written originally in English by writers with non-English names.

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