

Borealism: Introducing a Poetics of the North

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on Borealism.

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Come! come to my home in the north,
With pleasures thou canst not perceive.
(‘The Wooing of Boreas,’ Lewis Woodruff Hornblower
1896)

The excerpt above from obscure American poet Lewis Woodruff Hornblower serves as just one example of how the North has inspired authors and poets from time immemorial. In the poem, Hornblower narrates how *Βορέας* (Boreas), the ancient Greek personification of the North wind, abducts Ἠώς (Eos), the personification of dawn, referred to in the poem by her more familiar Roman name Aurora, creating the phenomenon of Aurora Borealis. Though it was Galileo Galilei who coined the term Aurora Borealis in 1619, through the misconception that the phenomenon was due to sunlight reflecting from the atmosphere, Hornblower reimagines the scene as Boreas abducting Aurora, resulting in the northern lights.

The wind deity Boreas along with the myth of Ultima Thule, the semi-mythical northernmost point mentioned in ancient Greek and Roman cartography, has fuelled the perception of the North in literature for centuries. The myth of Thule, for example, inspired Danish-Greenlandic explorer and author Knud Rasmussen to name his northernmost outpost in Greenland Thule, today better known as an American base.

Perhaps what initially sparked the ancient fascination with the North is the fact that the North remains relative to the position from where it is viewed. As Peter Davidson asserts in *The Idea of North* (2005), ‘[e]veryone carries their own idea of north within them’ (9). Therefore, the North itself is susceptible to the projection of what one might term dreams, as Peter Fjågesund’s work *The Dream of the North* (2018) explores: ‘[a]s the main title indicates, it is the study of a dream, and like other dreams, it has a tenuous and sometimes unpredictable relationship with reality’ (15). While acknowledging its multifaceted nature, Fjågesund asserts that ‘[t]he North, represents a politically and culturally distinct arena, whose history and development, when seen as a whole, forms an umbrella above the individual nation states’ (17). A common unclear unifier for nations to the North. Unclear, because what it represents remains relative.

Indeed, the North in literature has concretely served as unifying national symbol in the past. In the Nordic region during the Romantic era, the North became synonymous with a Nordic character. The Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger wrote in his famous poem ‘Guldhornene’ (1802, ‘The Gold Horns’) with reference to the discovery

of the Golden Horns of Gallehus: 'En Sagte Torden / Dundrer! / Hele Norden / Undrer!' (A peal of / distant thunder! / The North's / in total wonder). The thundering alluded to here is that produced by Thor's hammer, and the North itself is personified as being in awe at the discovery of the ancient Golden Horns. Thor's thunder associates the entirety of the North, and thus Denmark, with rugged strength and power. Similarly, Hans Christian Andersen associates the North with power in 'I Danmark er Jeg født' (In Denmark I am born), when he laments how Denmark used to be the rulers of the North to showcase Denmark's former perceived glory: 'Engang du herre var i hele Norden / bød over England nu du kaldes svag (You were once the ruler of the entire North, ruled over England now you are deemed weak). It is worth noting that in the Scandinavian languages the word for what is collectively known as the Nordic countries 'Norden' and 'the North' is the same. Oehlenschläger and Andersen thus play with the words' double meaning when using to glorify Denmark's and the Nordic region's past.

The fascination with *Norden* (the North) in literature is not limited to the Romantic era or Nordic countries, as Seamus Heaney's 1975 poetry collection *North* demonstrates. Heaney's North again is relative. In his collection North stands for Viking raiders, Northern European bog bodies, and, most importantly, the North of Ireland and its troubles. North as a collective myth furthermore enables the poet to contemplate Ireland's historical interconnectedness with Northern Europe. In the poem 'North', this interconnected history resonates through the speaker in 'the longship's swimming tongue' (line 20). Yet, memory is fragile like 'long swords rusting', artifacts left behind by past raiders of Ireland, which as all things eventually deteriorate. The former troubled relationship with the North thus enables the poet to contemplate the contemporary troubles within the North of Ireland.

There have been several attempts to redefine a concrete approach to the North in academic studies. In the 1970s, the Canadian geographer Louis Edmond Hamelin defined an inherent *Nordicity* present in northern North America. Literary scholar Daniel Chartier built on this concept when describing '[t]he imaginary of North as Discourse' in his 2006 article 'Towards a Grammar of the Idea of North: Nordicity, Winterity,' which defined the North as a 'discursive system ... which can be traced historically' (35). In Europe, the most recent development within this tradition is the aesthetic movement of Borealism, as put forward by Sylvain Briens in 'Boréalisme. Le Nord comme espace discursif' (2016) and 'Boréalisme. Pour un atlas sensible du Nord' (2018). Borealism enables us to develop a critical

approach to the North based on an aesthetic movement focused entirely on the imaginary North. Borealism seeks to understand a discursive creative, specifically literary, process of the North. What could also be named *a poetics of the north* (ποιεῖν/*poiein*, to make or create, as also defined by Aristotle – the verb that forms the etymological root of our modern English word Poetry).

Often associated with the northern lights, or aurora borealis, the adjective ‘boreal’ refers to the transformation of the natural phenomenon into a poetic and emotional phenomenon and forces us to consider two perspectives when studying the North: it correlates the fact that the North is produced as a network of images and representations to the idea that the North is invested in literature as metaphor (Briens 2018: 156); it also forces us to consider a particular *geopoetic* perspective (see Briens, Toudoire, and Ballotti 2023:169–70).

The neologism ‘Borealism’, introduced by the Swedish historian Gunnar Broberg in 1982, has been described as the northern transposition of Orientalism. However, while several scholars have used it to exemplify colonial attitudes towards the indigenous cultures of the Great North of Scandinavia, Borealism can be described in a less analogous fashion, in relation to cross-disciplinary movements invested in the creation of a North, not only in Scandinavia, but also circumpolar and historical. Borealism is a heterogeneous process as the North is considered both as the locus and the matrix. It refers precisely to this process of literary fabrication of a North towards which the journey remains above all *a poetic journey*, and whose adventure lies above all in the language. However, borealism, as an aesthetic process, aims to open up the disciplinary field of Nordic Studies and complement work on the North with a cross-disciplinary and dynamic approach with no specific time frame. From antiquity’s abstract Boreas to the present geopolitics of the arctic. Similarly, borealism is revitalising the concept of Nordicity in the context of globalisation and the ecological crisis.

While it is first and foremost an aesthetic movement, it has also become part of the political debate, as the challenges of global warming make the North the focus of our ecological anxieties. Thinking about the North cannot be done without taking into account geo-climatic phenomena such as globalisation, global warming, the threat to biodiversity, and ecological awareness.

The articles found in this special issue of *Scandinavica* will serve as an example of how this borealistic approach to literary scholarship can further our understanding of the study of the North. The contributions

featured explore the multifaceted dimension of the North across genres, time periods, geography, and languages. The issue includes articles from across academic backgrounds and traditions, most notably France and the United Kingdom, presenting outcomes of collaboration within the research and doctoral training network *NOUS: Nordic Studies UCL-Sorbonne*. The first article by Sylvain Briens and Juliana Lopoukhine, 'Transnational Imagi(ni)sm. Borealism and the *Avant-Gardes*' discusses how the emergence of the *Avant-gardes* or Modernists at the turn of the twentieth century brought with it a transformation of the Nordic pastoral tradition, remodelled as a modernist poetics, which Briens and Lopoukhine labels *Boreal Imaginism*. The second article by Annika Lindskog, 'Sounds of Nordic sites' explores how the North functions not only in literature but also in the traditionally more abstract world of music. Her article interrogates the notion of North in sounds, and finds it embedded within and intrinsically linked to its geographies and sites. The article by Alessandra Ballotti 'The Northern Gaze: Boreal Dynamics in Endogenous and Exogenous Processes,' the most theoretical in the issue, serves as an example of how this new concept of Borealism can be utilised to great effect as a literary theory. The article places the theory of Borealism in relation to other disciplines and links it to a pedagogical model of concrete experiences, facilitating an understanding of boreal dynamics, the mechanisms of reception as well as the cultural circulation of Borealism. In the second part, Pierre-Brice Stahl's 'Boreal Medievalism: The Imaginary of the Viking Age' develops the notion of *boreal medievalism* through a dialogue between Nordic studies, featuring the concept of borealism and history with the notion and field of medievalism. The article by Rikard Schönström, 'Imaginations of the North and the South in Esaias Tegnér's poetry,' explores the contrast between the North and the South, which was a recurrent topos in Scandinavian Romantic literature with particular focus on how it manifested itself in the works of the Swedish poet and professor of Greek language Esaias Tegnér. Our final article, Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre's 'Dark Borealism: Why Arctic Noir is the New Black,' investigates the success of the stories of explorers in the Far North and how the Scandinavian crime novel or Nordic Noir, gave rise to a new form of borealism, which Toudoire-Surlapierre defines as *Dark Borealism*.

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