Representations of Lapland in British Romantic Literature: toward ethnographical dissemination?

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Abstract:

Romantic representations of Lapland were chiefly the joint product of the eighteenth century primitivist and sublime theory, notably responsible for the Ossianic revival initiated by Scottish antiquarian James Macpherson in the 1760s. Still unknown to many, the mythical Gaelic bard Ossian and his poems set off all over Europe a real "Celtomania" that eventually earned this literary figurethe distinguished title of "Homer of the North", whose cultural significance far outstretched the bounds of the Scottish Highlands. As a matter of fact, sporadic literary allusions to Lapland and the Samí had already been made by that time through the publication and successive rewriting or imitations of two Lappish ballads. Subsequently entitled "Orra Moor" and "The Reindeer song," they were presented as genuine specimen of Lappish poetry first communicated by a native named Olaus Matthias to German humanist Johannes Scheffer who included them in his history of the Samí, Lapponia (1673). This rather contrasted with a dogmatic Christian approach of Arctic religions and mythologies in terms of superstition directly connected with an only half-suppressed European belief in witchcraft still prevailing as a popular referential medium. This paper addresses the issueof what might be termed "ethnographical dissemination", as resulting from the influence of Arctic travel writing upon Romantic poetry exemplified by the Lappish episode of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Destiny of Nations"(1796/1817).

Keywords: British Romanticism, S. T. Coleridge, Lapland, KnudLeem, Arctic mythology.

Introduction

Romantic representations of Lapland were chiefly inspired by the joint product of eighteenth century primitivist and sublime theory,[1]one of the driving forces, notably, of the Ossianic revival initiated by Scottish antiquarian James Macpherson in the 1760s. Still unknown to many, the mythical Gaelic bard Ossian and his poems set off all over Europe a real "Celtomania" that eventually earned this literary figurethe verydistinguishedtitle of "Homer of the North", whose cultural significance far outstretched the bounds of the Scottish Highlands.[2] Indeed, as Frank Edgard Farley already observed in 1906: "In view of the "runic" and 'Ossianic' vagaries of the half century following 1760, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the pleasure which the 'numerous Lapland compositions' gave, arose largely from the romantic suggestiveness of the background."[3] As a matter of fact, sporadic literary allusions to Lapland and the Samí had already been made by that time through the publication and successive rewriting or imitations of two Lappish ballads. Subsequently entitled "Orra Moor" and "The Reindeer song," they were presented as genuine specimen of Lappish poetry first communicated by a native named Olaus Matthias to German humanist Johannes Scheffer who included them in hisseminal history of the Samí, Lapponia (1673).[4]Of these two poetical rarities, "Orra Moor" wasmore frequentlypraised.Ossian's first advocate Dr Hugh Blair even quoted the entire Latin original in his Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian (1763) to prove his point that "Barbarity" was not "inconsistent with generous sentiments and tender affections."[5] This rather contrasted with a dogmatic Christian approach of Arcticbelief systems and mythologies in terms of superstition directly

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[1] See Ellingson, Tir, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Ashfield, Andrew, de Bolla, Peter, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*.Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[2] See Gaskill, Howard, "The Homer of the North", in *Interfaces*; n°27 (August 2007), pp. 13-24. See also his volume*The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, London: Continuum, 2008.

[3] Farley, Frank Edgar, "Three 'Lapland Songs'", in *PMLA*; vol. 21, n°1 (1906), [pp. 1-39] p. 32.

[4]Scheffer, John, *The History of Lapland: Wherein are Shewed the Original, Manners, Habits, Marriages, Conjurations, &c. of that People*. Oxford: George West and Amos Curtein, 1674, pp. 112-5.

[5] Blair, Hugh, *ADissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal.* London: T. Becket and T. A. De Hondt, 1763, pp. 13-14.

connected with an only half-suppressed Europeanbelief in witchcraft still prevailing as a popular referential medium.In what follows I will address the issue of what might be termed"ethnographical dissemination", as resulting from the influence of Arctic travel writing upon Romantic poetry. The impact of Europeansuperstition concerning witchcraft shall be first illustrated by a survey of a number ofrepresentations of Lapland in British Romantic literature, while the emergence of a newattitude towards Samímythology shall be discussed within the frame of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Destiny of Nations" (1796/1817).

Lapland and the Samí people were first introduced to British readers through Scandinavian accounts such as Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus[1](1555) by Swedish archdeacon Olaus Magnus, Scheffer'sLapponia (1673), Swedish Carl Linnæus's*IterLapponicumdei gratia institutum* 1732[2], and De Lapponibus Finmarchiæ[3](1767)by Norwegian missionary KnudLeem, as well as the scientific observations made in La figure de la terre[4](1738) by French naturalist Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, whose name we find attached in later editions to what may be the most influential poetical depiction of Lapland in eighteenth-century English-language literature, James Thomson's first seasonal ode to "Winter" (1726).[5]But it was only in 1789 that one could find an English travel narrative of Lapland, A Tour Through Sweden, Swedish-Lapland, Finland and Denmark[6](1789), based on the Fennoscandian summer

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[1]Olaus Magnus, *Description of the Northern peoples: Rome 1555*; transl. by Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens ; ed. by Peter Foote ; with annot. derived from the commentary by John Granlund. London: the Hakluyt society, 1996-8.

[2]Linnæus, Carl, *LachesisLapponica: Or, A Tour in Lapland* […] ; transl. by James Edward Smith. London: White and Cochrane, 1811, 2 vols.

[3]Leem, Knud, *An Account of the Laplanders of Finmark, Their Language, Manners, and Religion*[…], in *General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World: Many of which are Now First Translated Into English; Digested on a New Plan*; ed. John Pinkerton. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, OrmeetCadell& Davies, 1808, vol. 1, pp. 376-490.

[4]De Maupertuis, Pierre louis Moreau, *The Figure of the Earth : determined from Observations made by Order of the French King, at the Polar Circle*. London: T. Cox, J & P. Knapton and A. Millar, 1738.

[5] Thomson, James,*The Works of James Thomson: With His Last Corrections, Additions and Improvements*. London: A. Millar, 1757, p. 203-5, ll. 843-901.

[6]Consett, Matthew, *A Tour Through Sweden, Swedish-Lapland, Finland and Denmark: In a Series of Letters, Illustrated with Engravings*. London: J. Johnson, J. Goldsmith and T. Lewis, 1789.

expedition led by Sir Henry George Liddell of Ravensworth, Durham in 1786.

However, representations of Lapland and its inhabitants in British literature had for a long time been reduced to an eldritch vignette resulting partly from Europe's own beliefs in witchcraft and spirits, which found in the far and mysterious North a fitting home ground, especially if one is reminded of this biblical prophecy predicting how "out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land."[1] In the end, what was deemed a domestic affliction could also be easily projected to the distant Arctic wilds,like Shakespeare's "Lapland sorcerers"[2]or Milton's "Lapland witches"[3]who crystallizedJames VI's royalcertitude, allegedly speaking from personal experience,[4] that "the devil finds greatest ignorance and barbarity[…] in such wild parts of the world, as Lapland and Finland."[5]

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the myth of northern witchcraft continued to flourish during the eighteenth century and still dominated Romantic literary productions,starting with Richard Hole'sArthur: Or the Northern Enchantment (1789) whose sixth book opens with the description of a winter scene in eastern Laplandsaid to be derived from Olaus Magnus,before moving into the interior of a cavern where the "Weird Sisters, or Northern Parcæ",[6]immediately evocative of Shakespeare's witches in Macbeth, are found performing some incantations.[7] Once again, we catch them conspiring against the British

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[1]Jeremiah 1:14, in *The Bible, Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*; ed. Robert Carroll and StephenPrickett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 827.

[2]Shakespeare, William, *The Comedy of Errors* IV, 3; ed. Charles Whitworth. Oxford: OUP, 2002, p. 147, l. 11.

[3] Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* II; ed. Alastair Fowler. Oxon: Routledge, 2013, p. 143, l. 665.

[4] In allusion to the particularly adverse weather, among other mishaps, that delayed Anne of Denmark bride's naval escort back to Scotland after he had married her by proxy in August 1589. Worried about her safety, he sailed there himself to take his bride and became convinced to be the victim of a conspiracy of northern witches, Scottish, Danish and Norwegian. Cf. Stewart, Alan, *The Cradle King: A Life of James VI & I*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2003, pp. 105-23. Willumsen, Liv Helene, *Witches of the North: Scotland and Finnmark*. Leiden : Brill, 2013, pp. 331, 361.

[5] Normand, Lawrence, Roberts, Gareth, eds.,*Witchcraft in early modern Scotland: James VI's Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*. Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000, p. 414.

[6] Hole, Richard, *Arthur: Or, The Northern Enchantment. A Poetical Romance, in Seven Books* I. London: G.G.J & J. Robinson, 1789, p. 7.

[7]Hole, Richard, *Arthur: Or, The Northern Enchantment*VI, pp. 171-82.

crown then held by legendary King Arthur, by hindering his union to sweet Inogen, Merlin's daughter, and by assisting the Saxon invader through their occult agency. Similarly, Henry Boyd's "imitation of Gray's Descent of Odin",written in a climate of post-revolutionary gallophobia with the growing threat of a French invasion, ascribes the storm that scattered the British naval blockade of Brest in January 1803 to the supernatural intervention of "The Witch of Lapland", summoned here by the "fiend of Gaul", namely Napoleonic France.[1]Most of the time, poetical references to Lappish witchcraft were rather brief and anecdotal, be they one quatrain long, like in Dr.Nathan Drake's "Ode to Superstition" (1790): "Mid Lapland's woods, and noisome wastes forlorn,/Where lurid hags the moon's pale orbit hail:/There, in some vast, some wild and cavern'd cell,/Where flits the dim blue flame,/They drink warm blood, and act the deed of hell"[2]; James Hogg's ballad, TheQueen's Wake (1813): "And quhan we cam to the Lapland lone/The fairies war all in array;/For all the genii of the north/War keipyng their holeday"[3],or swiftly mentioned in a line of John Keats's "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds"[4](1818) as well as Lord Byron's Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn(1821): "Like Lapland witches to ensure a wind".[5] Scottish writer Walter Scott made twice an allusion to that occult and profitable trade of selling winds driven by Laplanders according to Olaus Magnus, whose authority is first invoked in the metrical poemRokeby[6](1813) and in the 1833 re-edition ofThe Pirate(1821) for his

[1] Boyd, Henry, "The Witch of Lapland" in Monti, Vicenzo, *The Penance of Hugo: A Vision on the French Revolution, in the Manner of Dante, in Four Cantos*; transl. Henry Boyd. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1805, pp. 173-80.

[2] Drake, Nathan, « Ode to Superstition », *in Literary Hours: Or, Sketches Critical and Narrative*. Sudbury: J. Burkitt, 1800, vol. 1, pp. 150-1, ll. 13-20.

[3] Hogg, James, *The Queen's Wake: A Legendary Poem* I, viii. Edinburgh: George Goldie, 1813, p. 74.

[4] "Then there's a little wing, far from the Sun, Built by a Lapland Witch turn'd maudlin Nun;" cf. Keats, John, « Epistle to John Hamilton », in *The Complete Works of John Keats*; ed. H. Buxton Forman. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1818, vol. 2, pp. 213, ll. 45-6.

[5] "Like Lapland witches to ensure a wind;" cf. Byron, George Gordon, Lord, *Waltz: An Apostrophic Hymn*—by Horace Hornem, Esq. (The noble author of Don Juan). London: W. Clark, 1821, p. 13.

[6] "Whate gales are sold on Lapland's shore,"cf. Scott, Walter, *Rokeby; A Poem* II, xi. Edinburgh: John Ballantyne& Co.,1813, p. 70, as well as the corresponding « Note VI. », p. xxx.

Magnum Opus.[1] The latter novel even features a buffoon mise en scèneparodying a northern oracle for the amusement of an assembly of Saint John revelers in Shetlandaround the end of the seventeenth century:"[…] the housekeeper we have already mentioned, was installed in the recess of a large window, studiously darkened by bear-skins and other miscellaneous drapery, so as to give it something the appearance of a Laplander's hut[…]".[2] The cultural association between Lapland and witchery was then so evident to Scott's readership that it only neededto be alluded tohere with a slighthint of exoticism.

Besides witchcraft, Lapland was also fantasized as the realm of spirits and could therefore provide the perfect setting for "gothic" or supernatural tales of terror that flooded the British literary market at the turn of the nineteenth century. Thus, "Hrim Thor or The Winter King. A Lapland Ballad"(1801) merely relies on the otherworldly dimension of northernmostFennoscandia,[3]while Anne Bannerman's "The Fisherman of Lapland" (1802) makes use of the idea of boreal gloom to stage the apparition of a spectral shadow on the icy ridges of a storm-beaten cliff, after its former owner, a fisherman named Peter, disappeared at sea.[4]

Of all these authors previously cited, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was certainly the most outstanding in his representation of Lapland and Samí culture. *"The Destiny of Nations. A Vision"*[5] (1817) seeks to allegorize the historical progress of man according to David Hartley'spsychological empiricism and Joseph Priestley's necessitarianism (a materialist determinism imbued with theological optimism), whose influence wasdeterminant to his early writing.[6] Indeed, such an ambition dates back to autumn 1794, when he composed the 364 original lines for Robert

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[1] See note entitled "Sale of Winds", in Scott, Walter, Sir, *Introductions, and Notes and Illustrations, to the Novels, Tales, and Romances of the Author of Waverley*. Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1833, vol. 2, pp. 44-5.

[2]Scott, Walter, Sir, *The Pirate* XXI; ed. Mark A. Weinstein and Alison Lumsden.Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001, p. 195.

[3][Anon.], "Hrim Thor or The Winter King. A Lapland Ballad", in *Tales of Terror; with an introductory dialogue*. London: R. Faulder, J. Walker, Scatcherd et al., 1808, pp. 16-21.

[4] Bannerman, Anne, "The Fisherman of Lapland", in *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*. London: Vernor and Hood, 1802, pp. 91-6.

[5]Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*; ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 131-48.

[6] See part of Peter Mann's introduction in Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 1: Lectures, 1795: On Politics and Religion*; ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. liii-lxvii.

Southey's Joan of Arc, an Epic Poem(1796),[1] before completing them into an independent piece the same year, only to be published in 1817. Be that as it may, Coleridge choosesto build an Arcticallegory of superstition, this time from a progressive perspective where "Superstition with unconscious hand/Seat Reason on her throne" and thus stands for an intermediary stage from ignorance to reason as the manifestation of man's elementary response to his natural environment. To do so, he recreatesa winter scene in Lapland with the help ofKnudLeem'stravel account, quoted rather extensively, which seems to indicate a real concern for ethno-geographical verisimilitude:

As ere from Lieule-Oaive'svapoury head
The Laplander beholds the far-off sun
Dart his slant beam on unobeying snows,
While yet the stern and solitary Night
Brooks no alternate sway, the Boreal Morn
With mimic lustre substitutes its gleam.
Guiding his course, or by Niemi lake
Or BaldaZhiok, or the mossy stone
Of Solfar-Kapper, while the snowy blast
Drifts arrowy by, or eddies round his sledge
Making the poor babe at its mother's back
Scream in its scanty cradle: he the while
Wins gentle solace as with upward eye
He marks the streamy banners of the North,
Thinking himself those happy spirits shall join
Who there in floating robes of rosy light
Dance sportively. (Destiny; 133-4, ll. 64-80)

Despite his scrutiny of the topography of Lapland, Coleridge takes Niemi[2] to be a lake instead of a mountain, reported by Maupertuis who, unlike his companion the abbéOuthier, forgets to distinguish it from the

[1] Southey, Robert, *Joan of Arc, an Epic Poem* II. Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1796, pp. 39-65, ll. 1-140, 144-7, 223-65, 273-85, 292-452.

[2] Let us be notified that *niemi* is a common Finnish place name that means "cape", "peninsula" or "tongue of land".

neighbouring lake Anjaagi[1]in the most romantic description of his scientific treaty. This negligence invited James Thomson to refer both to the lake and the eminence as Niemi, or rather as being located in a region of that name,[2] which probably induced the poet of the Quantocks to christen the lake in the same manner. Lowes demonstratesquite convincingly this passage to be the aggregation "of entities themselves substantially unmodified—Leemius, and [David]Crantz, and Maupertuis, and [Erasmus]Darwin adroitly pieced together […]",[3]even though it is Leem'sauthority that stands out, with four footnotes being transcribed straight from *De Lapponibus Finmarchiæ*.

One may still wonder why Coleridge wouldn't providemore details in his fourth note on "JaibmeAbmo"[sic], two words quite unfamiliar to an English ear and barely enlightening the line to whichthey are affixed: "[Vuokho] Speeds from the mother of Death his destin'd way"(Destiny 1796; p. 134, l. 96). At this point, we might criticize the poet's slipshod documentation that leaves his reader in the dark concerning Leem's precious account of the Samí underworld, "JabmeAibmo, where Jabme-Akko, or the mother of death, holds her empire."[4]Here is now the full folkloristic extract that can easily be traced back to Leem:

I deem those legends terrible, with which
The polar ancient thrills his uncouth throng:
Whether of pitying Spirits that make their moan
O'er slaughter'd infants, or that Giant Bird
Vuokho[sic], of whose rushing wings the noise
Is Tempest, when the unutterable Shape
Speeds from the mother of Death his destin'd way
To snatch the murderer from his secret cell.
(Destiny of Nations 1796; p. 134, ll. 90-7)

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[1]Outhier, Réginald, *Journal of a Voyage to the North in the Years, 1736 and 1737*, in *General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels*[…]; ed. John Pinkerton, vol. 1, 1808, p. 288.

[2] See Thomson, James, "Winter", in *The Works of James Thomson,* p. 204, l. 875, as well as appended footnote.

[3] Livingstone Lowes, John,*The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 95. See also whole chapter 6 entitled "Joiner's Work: An Interlude" (*Ibid.* pp. 86-102).

[4]Leem, Knud, *An Account of the Laplanders of Finmark*[…]*,* p. 460.

Just like his contemporaries, Coleridge knew the sublime potential of such obscure northern beliefs put into verse, which may explain his relative silence upon their source and original form, as well as the poetic licence he took with them. This is certainly how he could engageinto mythopoeia, by interpolating three different legends, namely that of mourning spirits called "Epparis, or Shjort"[1], of the demon bird "Vuokko", and possibly that of tutelary mountain-birds called "Saivo-Lodde";[2] thus making of the Vuokko a sort of avenging thunderbird deity, whereas it is simply described by Leem"as a bad demon, appearing in the form of a huge and foul bird, from which the Noaaid, or magician is said to receive those infamous and noxious [Gan] flies[3][…] numbered among their magical instruments most remarkable […] as an instrument of injuring."[4] Or shouldwe suppose thatthe poem's "Vuokho" was sent by some shaman after the murderer of the infants mentioned right before? Luckily for Coleridge, the Finnish historian of religion Sigfried Rafael Karsten would later admit that "passevare[or saivo] lodde" was "generally called vurneslodde (also vuokko),"[5] which almost legitimizes, still partly only, the English poet's retelling of Lappish mythology in "The Destiny of Nations".

On the one hand, the grafting of such a copious Arctic digression in a poem first of all dedicated to the feminine martyr hero of medieval France Joan of Arc doesn't go without raising some interrogations. It confirms on the other hand this well-averred Romantic search for new poetical horizons far up north. Consequently, authors like Coleridge realized how the wealth of scenic and ethnographical descriptions contained in Arctic travel accounts such as Leem'sDe LapponibusFinmarchiæcould considerably enrich their own compositions. This is made all the more obvious in "*The Destiny of Nations*", where a versification of what looks very much alike the Inuit myth of Sedna, a sea

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[1] "This kind of spectre is believed to wander up and down where any infant who had not received a name had been slain. It is [said] to cry out until the infant has a name given in, then to vanish." (*Ibid.*, p. 480).

[2] "Its office is to shew the way to a magician while journeying. The Laplanders say that this bird is frequently sent out by a rival and revengeful magician, to the destruction of magicians and other men." See Leem, Knud, *An Account of the Laplanders of Finmark*, p. 460.

[3] SeeLeem, Knud, *An Account of the Laplanders of Finmark*,pp. 479-80.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 462, 479.

[5] Karsten, Rafael, *The Religion of the Samek. Ancient Beliefs and Cults of the Scandinavian and Finnish Lapps*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955, p. 86.

goddess, follows immediately the Lappish episode (Destiny; pp. 135-6, ll. 98-126), starting with the terrifying voyage of "The Greenland Wizard"[1] commonly known as"angekok" down into the darkness of her watery abyss.[2] It comes then as no surprise that the success achieved by his "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), owing very much also to his Arctic readings,[3]secured him a place in the British literary pantheon. So while the Romantic imagination became fuelled with heretofore unknown wild legends and sublime landscapes, it also directed northern primitivism toward ethnographical dissemination, as previously exemplified by Coleridge's Lappish prelude to "The Destiny of Nations", which clearly departs from the stale vignette of the Lapland witch still widely popular at the turn of the nineteenth century. With that in mind, as well as the benefit of hindsight, would it be deemed too absurdto credit the Romantic poet for, in a way, attempting a first small but nonetheless significant step towards the study ofArcticfolkloreand religious history?

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[1]Seethe eponymouschapter in Ward, David, *Coleridge and the Nature of Imagination: Evolution, Engagement with the World, and Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 34-51.

[2] Likewise, Coleridge gives his source: Cranz, David, *The History of Greenland: Containing a Description of the Country, and Its Inhabitants: and Particularly a Relation of the Mission, Carried on for Above These Thirty Years by the UnitasFratrum, at New Herrnhuth and Lichtenfels, in that Country*; transl. John Gambold. London: J. Dodsley, T. Becket *et al.*, 1767, vol. 1, pp. 205-8.

[3]See Livingstone Lowes, John,*The Road to Xanadu*, pp. 398-406.

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