

Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

This essay is a personal attempt at introducing a possible creative history of the idea of North. This is presented *via* three different examples through which notions such as those of limit and experience are thought of as preliminary phases and yet, combined together, also as something essential to better understand the sense of threshold *qua* notion which, as I suggest, can be used to describe and depict the North in contemporary terms.

*At the beginning it is all about position: where is the North?*

*Then, in the distance, a second voice: what is the North?*

*Between the two questions, images pop up, start fluctuating, merge, split, and disappear.*

If one had to pinpoint where a so-called North of this world might be, the first answer would be in Europe as well as in North America (Canada), therefore in the Arctic, excluding Russia, and to its fullest extent, the Asian continent, as these are references to what the majority of us see and read as East. This, of course, is a question of geography. But even if one had to spot possible cultural differences, the East would stay the East, thus a codified area with its different States, societies, cultures, traditions, and so forth.

Same story with the West.

Now, this might lead - as a consequence - to a possible comparison between North and South, a comparison where, besides the similarities, the latter would be likely to result more *visible*, definitely baroque in its multiple shapes and sites, as many as the versions of the same South one can find and yet, on the contrary, if you ideally look at the opposite direction, a convergence of lines towards the same horizon is what you should grasp, something which - in the end - confirms how inevitably unique this perception seems to be, as well as impossible to completely get: the North as such.

But let's rephrase this reasoning, avoiding 'unique' and 'impossible'.

We have just said Europe and North America together is where you start searching for the North. But this immediately raises the argument: why not consider the Southern Hemisphere? Why not include the relativity of one's own location? Thus, logically: why not Antarctica? Or: aren't there different ideas of North, as many ideas of North as of South? Good questions, to be sure, but here this sense of geometry must necessarily fail, or at least withdraw. History and culture have already given proper answers. The first expansion of the human race, as everyone knows, started from the area that became Africa, the center of the world, and originally evolved throughout Eurasia where, consequently, human development

## Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

took place and roots were put down. Here, also, one can trace how human 'movements' (migrations, battles, creation of settlements and so forth) shaped Europe and Asia differently. Not to mention how culture contributed to this 'framework', for instance through local and specific myths from the South of Europe as well as from its opposite side (Hyperboreans, Norse religion), producing a legacy whose traces, later on, in different forms, were even 'exported' - consider again North America, in which there was Vinland where, now, you can find Newfoundland (yes, exactly: Canada).

All of this is well-known, but this is also what can give a definite certainty regarding why, in this world, there should only be one area referable to as North, an area having such a polarizing force.

But having said that, it seems true or at least evident that its mystery remains.

So, once again, what is the North?

In order to articulate a possible answer in cultural terms, I will present three examples. They come from literature, music, and film (different fields in different ages) and their possible interplay as a single, creative variation of the same idea will hopefully prove coherent with the intellectual histories these cases imply.



Drawing from the Acerbi archives in Mantua

*North by Northeast - A note on the Nordic travel (account) by Giuseppe Acerbi (1798-1800)*

## Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

In speaking of European diarists, the Italian Giuseppe Acerbi (1773-1846) represents one of the best-kept secrets in the field, considering that he used to write about every single voyage he undertook, and that he more or less visited all of Europe (not to mention his work in Egypt), spending years in many countries. In particular, his Nordic travel gave us a travel account, the first version of which was written in English as *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland, to the North Cape: in the Years 1798 and 1799* (the version considered here), which is one of the most interesting case studies of monographs about European Nordic cultures between the 18th and the 19th century. [1] On this journey, he went from the South of Sweden to North Cape, passing through Finland - a country that became independent from Sweden a few years later - and subsequently had long stays in Sweden as well as in Norway before leaving for England. In relation to this diary, it is worth saying something about the backstory of his travel and the 'coverage' in the text of when he finally reached the farthest point of his itinerary, North Cape.

To put it briefly, most of the literature about Acerbi - mainly by Italian and Finnish scholars - agrees on the original reason for his travel, which was mainly business: as soon as he arrived in Stockholm, his purpose was to head to Saint Petersburg, Russia, following a well-known 'path' already undertaken by previous Italian travellers/businessmen. Nevertheless, something happened in Sweden - and this is still the object of current investigation - which persuaded him to change both the direction and the sense of his 'mission'. Along with a fellow traveller who was already with him, Bernardo Bellotti, and others that he met both in Stockholm and on the course of his journey, he decided to go North, in order to reach North Cape (in a season and through an itinerary rarely considered by previous travellers, as Acerbi often remarks in his diary). Also, he decided to take notes and focus his attention on what one might define as the 'anthropology' of the local inhabitants, writing about them, about their cultures and cults, as though these notes and, therefore, his travel account were conceived of as part of his 'field', the body of a global anthropological survey. Naturally, the discipline did not exist as such in those days and thus his expedition was, so to speak, a pseudo-anthropological one.

Acerbi's process of rewriting offers different editions of his diary in different languages, some of which include radical edits and even different cultural perspectives. But in the text of every edition, one cannot help but notice how the precise passage about North Cape generally occupies a small part within the entire written 'architecture' - always a very short paragraph, almost suggesting this moment as a parenthesis or pretext. Here one might see a contradiction in relation, for instance, to the title of the diary in its first edition, to the northward plan of travel and so on, elements in which the act of going North are given prominence. But in the end this only emphasizes how North Cape was essentially a

## Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

(narrative) means for Acerbi, something to get what would have become the real goal, which was strengthened sense and value of his publication.

Like the frame for a painting.

Therefore, for Acerbi, the idea of North had to appear through the only possible conception a classical mind could think of and use: as limit.

*An (im)possible frontier? Through Glenn Gould's radio documentary, 'The Idea of North' (1967)*

In Glenn Gould's oeuvre - his renditions, recordings, even in his writings - there is often a vibrant sense of space (directly, through counterpoints, as theme), so much so that it sounds conceivable to affirm that it plays a pivotal role, likely in relation to a certain tradition which seem to go back to Bach (logically, if one wants to remain in the field). In light of this assumption, let's say that his 'idea of North' is not an exception and must be listened to as genuinely Gouldian, at least for its conception and expression. The piece is available, and one can find it on the CBC website. [2]

We are in Canada, on a train, heading North. There are four voices 'in conversation', plus a sort of extra-voice, as a sort of 'conductor' - an anthropologist, a sociologist, a nurse, a government official, and a surveyor. At the beginning, Gould delivers his take on the action and introduces the characters:

*I have long been intrigued by that incredible tapestry of tundra and taiga which constitute the Arctic and sub-Arctic of our country. I have read about it, written about it, and even pulled up my parka once and gone there. Yet like all but a few Canadians I have no real experience of the North [...] and the North has remained for me a convenient place to dream about, spin told tales about, and in the end, avoid. This program however brings together some remarkable people who have had the direct confrontation with that northern third of Canada, who lived and worked there and in whose lives the North has played the very vital role.*

Now, besides the beauty of the entire work - masterfully developed as a personal, masked composition - it is interesting how, in each story, whether it be of facts related to this or that, of 'character' or of dreams about possible and different lives in the future, the narrative about the Canadian North shapes this space as though it were a new frontier. The constant sound of the train - metaphor/synecdoche of any modern travel - undoubtedly helps to suggest this image of North which, however, requires a further explanation,

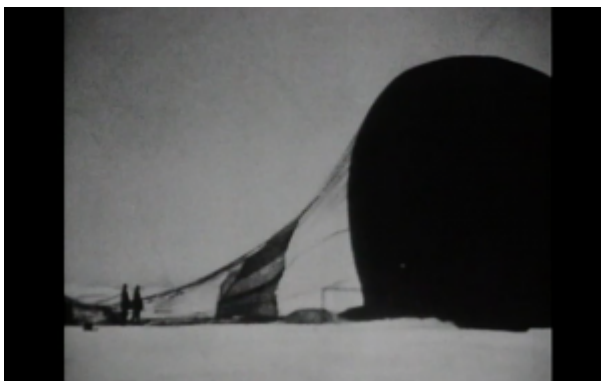
Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

partially given at the end of the program. It is the surveyor (the 'conductor') speaking:

*A certain William James then, perhaps at the turn of this XX century, said that there was no moral equivalent to war. Well, I read that. [...] That is that there's nothing like war for providing something for you to be against. Apparently very few of us can afford to be for something. Apparently all of us can afford to be against something. [...] And in order to answer his perplexity I'm gonna say the common enemy of both of us whether it's now or yesterday or forever [...] I s'pose the common enemy is mother nature, mother nature. [...] So I go on to say that the North is the war, that you can afford to be against mother nature if only humans make it possible. Well, he asks, What's wrong with that? What's good about that or bad about that? I say there was a time, believe me, in living memory again when humans used to combine against mother nature. [...] No longer do humans combine to defy or to measure or to read or to understand or to live with this thing called mother nature. Our number one enemy instead of being mother nature is of course human nature. [...] So we're up against this William James. [...] The moral equivalent for us is going North.*

When in his introduction Gould refers to North as 'convenient place to dream about, spin told tales about, and in the end, avoid' he suggests the North as a sort of metaphysical space in his own terms, attractive and yet beyond, therefore something open to thereness and possibilities, the starting point to arrive at the end of the program, through the reference to a William James' essay. [3] Here, the 'rendition' made - 'going North' as war - works as a displacement in which the act of rediscovery of a certain geography becomes a better way for a society to sustain itself, as though the frontier myth were a chance for society's survival, for its renewal.

Needless to say: still out of History, through a metaphysical aura - the blind and eternal present of the radio with its voices - 'going North' falls within the domain of what History 'announces', namely experience in modern terms.



Still from "The Idea of North"

Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

*The meaning is set adrift - Filmmaker Rebecca Baron's idea of North between limit and experience*

If 'experience' is one of the key words in a modern understanding of the arts, likewise 'appropriation' seems to play a role of some importance in our contemporary age, when it comes to fathom the logic of those artistic practices at stake so far.

While watching Rebecca Baron's 'The Idea of North' (1995), this is undoubtedly something one feels is necessary to deal with in order to better understand the entire operation, because this short film focuses on S. A. Andrée's famous Arctic balloon expedition of 1897 [4] - the goal of which, to put it briefly, was to go from Svalbard to either Russia or Canada, straight over the North Pole - and to reenact aspects of that disaster. It looks at the days after the accidental landing in which Andrée and his two fellow travellers, who survived the impact, spend the last moments before their deaths. Baron does this by working with still photography. More specifically, the photographs included in the film are those, quite famous, taken by one of the three men - Nils Strindberg - during those days, and only found in 1930, during the fortuitous recovery of what remained of the expedition (including, also, what remained of their diaries).

Now, Baron's 'Idea of North' is an essay film that discloses a meditation on time, a meditation in which many of its different levels are at stake, creating a texture between Past and Present, memory and thereness capable of disclosing a set of potential themes around the aforementioned set of photographs. In our case, let's focus on the sense of space in the photographs and therefore through the film. Here, the first impression that comes to mind is a possible equation between North and death: if one thinks about the North Pole in Andrée's view - merely a passage - and then considers what would have become later on of the travellers, there is no doubt that it definitely was their end, in the sense that it is a truth in historical terms. However, in my opinion, the 'poetic truth' Baron's film seems to suggest is of quite a different tone, or - to be honest - a more sophisticated one, an angle through which the sense of the North seems structured as a limit as well as an experience. This is effectively visible: in the choice of representing that space mainly through those photographs (that is, the limit - of representation, of History); in the way through which her appropriation of those images allows us a new perception (that is, the experience - the creative act, our vision and time as viewers). Also, one might say that her film is, in the end, a continuous movement-tension between these two poles, something which would lead to suggest the same North as a poetic threshold:

*Speak, you too,*

Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three  
examples

*Speak as the last one,*

*have your say.*

*Speak -*

*But do not separate the no from the yes.*

*Give your saying also meaning:*

*give it its shadow.*

*Give it enough shadow,*

*give it as much*

*as you know to be parceled out between*

*midnight and midday and midnight.*

*Look around:*

*see how alive it gets all around -*

*At death! Alive!*

*Speaks true, who speaks shadows.*

*But now the place shrinks, on which you stand:*

*Whereto now, shadow-stripped one, whereto?*

*Climb. Feel yourself upwards.*

*Thinner you become, unrecognizable, finer!*

*Finer: a fathom*

*along which it wants to descend, the star:*

*to swim down below, below*

*where he sees himself swimming: in the swell*

*of wandering words.* [5]

'There is no way to swim in the Arctic', one might say. Because ice is everywhere.

Nevertheless, some 'wandering words' remain - the end of the film, in which we see traces of those notes left by Andrée in his second diary - and they still allow us to 'imagine' something, that that language is made substance, but a force shaped it: passing through it, separating comprehension and visibility, producing upcoming ruins.

In 'light' of this, looking back, the sense of space seems abandoned on those layers of ice...

With its meaning - as Baron suggests - 'set adrift'.

## **Endnotes**

1 Acerbi, Giuseppe. (1802). *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland, to the North Cape: in the Years 1798 and 1799*. London: Joseph Mawman.

2 One can listen to it here: <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/More+Shows/Glenn+Gould+-+The+CBC+Legacy/Audio/1960s/ID/2110447480/>.

There is also a filmed docudrama made by Judith Pearlman in 1970, based on the same radio play and which is always possible to watch on the same website.

The link to its first 'chapter': [http://www.cbc.ca/player/RADIO+HOLDING+PEN/DVD+8+\(Gould\)/ID/2193451130/](http://www.cbc.ca/player/RADIO+HOLDING+PEN/DVD+8+(Gould)/ID/2193451130/).

3 One can read it at <http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm>.

4 See Wilkinson, Alec. (2011). *The Ice Balloon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

5 Celan, Paul. (2005). 'Speak, You Too', in Pierre Joris, (ed.), *Paul Celan: Selections*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 54-55.



Mapping the Unknown - North as threshold: a meditation in three examples

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