

# The North, National Romanticism, and the Gothic

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*The wild and widely changeable nature in the North does not accommodate the painter like the harmonious nature in France. The former does not, like the latter, offer the artist ready-made motifs like ripe fruit[...] In France a landscape painter may perhaps be an artist using only his eyes. [...] In the North the landscape painter must be a poet.<sup>1</sup>*

The emphasis within art histories of Nordic landscapes has traditionally been on topography, landmarks, light and nature. In all these dimensions the touchstone has been the oppositional binary between North and South, as exemplified in the quote from Richard Bergh above. In this paradigm the South is an Arcadian realm, bathed in an easy, golden light, whilst the North is harsh in its extremes and its light alternatively too stark or too dull for the purposes of art. As such, the North is frequently presented in discourse as a demanding subject for art, something that you must push beneath the surface to understand, a poetic landscape. This chapter seeks to analyse this convention through consideration of a few artists who broke the implicit rules governing the representation of the North, thus revealing the boundaries of what could and could not be accommodated within the shared visions of National Romanticism.

It was not enough to paint landscape within the national borders to fulfil the requirements of a truly national art. It had to be painted in the right way to become part of the great resonance chamber of national art histories. There are various ways an artist might deviate from this. Marianne Koskimies-Envall has, for example, explored why the prolific Finnish landscape artist Arvid Liljelund

(1844–1899) was and remains excluded from the canon. His oeuvre, revolving around the fishing communities of the west coast and Finnish archipelago, represented the wrong Finland and the wrong (Swedish-speaking) Finns for a national movement that located itself in the central and eastern Finnish lakelands.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, women artists in general are frequently excluded from the canon and regarded as too open to foreign influences.<sup>3</sup>

For a number of decades now, art history of the Nordic region has been pushing back against the parameters, early-established in traditional national canons. Art History as a discipline emerged in the nineteenth century in close connection with linguistics, ethnography and archaeology, all guided by a pursuit of a distinctive national language and/or culture. All these disciplines can be linked to the demarcation of national boundaries, “us and them,” located in the practices of census taking and mapping.<sup>4</sup> For nations newly constituting themselves in the nineteenth century, the landscape had the potential to function as a shared point of origin with roots that reached back into the past, circumventing the complexities of fractured political realities.<sup>5</sup>

I am interested here in what I identify as artists whose work did not fit despite their focus on landscape themes. The idea I will propose is that the grounds for this outsider status can be traced in their handling of landscapes in which the lurking threat of the untamed North remains too strong, destabilizing the precarious consensus of National Romanticism. The work of these artists is disruptive in a number of ways. One form of disruption is temporal.

Though the National Romantic landscape often recorded nuances of season or time of day, it also existed outside time, a uchronic fantasy: the nation-in-the-land must have always existed. Imagery that showed the land as subject to change and the marks of modernity disturbed this vision of a timeless landscape. The second form of disruption I will consider relates to the relationship between the land and the individual viewer. In particular, where they are placed in a position of vulnerability – subject to the land – rather than the land subject to their gaze. This latter idea presents a connection to that alternative framing of the North within the Gothic tradition: not as home but as haunting site of threatening allure.

### PEDER BALKE AND THE ARCTIC

My central case study is the Norwegian artist Peder Balke (1804–1887). His career in the early nineteenth century took many promising turns but stopped short, ultimately, of a sustainable income. Balke's paintings have in recent decades been rediscovered and re-inserted into the canon, the grounds for their marginalisation no longer resonant. His work has been re-evaluated as Nordic Sublime, leading to international exhibitions and to the recent acquisition of his works by Nordic National Galleries.<sup>6</sup>

Balke failed as a professional artist, despite his focus on the Norwegian landscape/seascape genre and despite the support he received at various points in his artistic career and his (incomplete) studies at the Royal School of Drawing in Christiania (Oslo), the Royal Academy at Stockholm, as well as with Johan Christian Dahl in Dresden.<sup>7</sup> I propose that the reasons for his commercial and critical failure in his lifetime can be traced back to the two disruptions to National Romanticism introduced above. Reflection upon this continues the work of revealing the culturally constructed and bounded, rather than inherent and natural, relationship between landscape art and national identity.<sup>8</sup>

*From North Cape* (c.1840; fig. 1) is an example of Balke's work on the theme of his expedition to northern Norway, undertaken in 1832. The icy headland of the North Cape, popularly understood as the northernmost point of Europe, is shown illuminated by a burst of sunlight from behind dark clouds. The almost monochrome palette emphasises cold, dark sea, land and sky and the dazzling effect of the sun on the waves. The viewpoint is low, sweeping across the surface of the sea and up to the cape. It is shared by a group of tourists in a rowing boat, while others gather on the nearby headland. Though the North Cape constituted a notable landmark within the borders of Norway, it nevertheless falls short as national landscape.

The icy wastes of the Arctic were a subject that chimed more with the European Gothic sensibility. Descriptions of such landscapes featured in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe and the poetry of Novalis.<sup>9</sup> The inhospitable nature of the Arctic was dramatized in such a way as to suggest allegories of man's struggles with an implacable, uncaring universe. This can be seen, for example, in Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) *The Arctic Sea* (1823–24, Hamburger Kunsthalle) in which the jagged peaks of pack ice present the ultimate, inhospitable landscape.<sup>10</sup> Balke would likely have had the opportunity to see this work, as it was in the possession of Dahl during the period Balke studied with him in Dresden. But *From North Cape* does not present an allegory of this kind.

Only a few artists actually made the trek to the far North. The majority, like Friedrich, relied for their depictions on descriptions from travelogues and the limited selection of topographical views made by the more intrepid. Balke had encountered the Arctic paintings by the German artist Johann Christian Ezdorf (1801–1851) in the royal collection at Rosendal Palace, Stockholm. Ezdorf was one of those who had actually visited the North Cape. Balke was inspired by Ezdorf and by other prints and drawings available in



Fig 1. Peder Balke, *From North Cape*, c. 1840, oil on canvas, 67.5 x 84 cm, The National Museum, Oslo (Photo: The National Museum).

Stockholm from various Arctic expeditions and was the first Norwegian artist to venture so far.<sup>11</sup> The impact of this journey marked Balke's art for the rest of his life. Though he continued to produce scenes of rural Norway alongside Arctic scenes, his return again and again to the view of the North Cape and the crashing surf of the Arctic ocean on rocky shores.

Balke's preoccupation with the Arctic as a subject differed markedly from the customary subjects of Norwegian art. For the emerging Norwegian middle class, paintings of fjords and valleys offered consumable access to the landscape of their nation. These views mirrored the evolving tourist routes that allowed travellers to visit the dramatic and picturesque scenery of western Norway. But the Arctic was another matter. Sparsely inhabited, it did not offer the viewer a point of connection with national history and national settlement. The possibility of appealing to a self-consciously Norwegian, emerging intelligentsia with such Arctic scenes was therefore limited.

The alien nature of the Arctic may explain the appeal of Balke's work to his international patrons. King Louis Philippe of France, who had visited northern Norway during his youth in exile, commissioned two paintings depicting his journey and purchased thirty-three more sketches. German newspapers also spoke enthusiastically about Balke's North Cape scenes, though after 1849 no more of Balke's works were purchased by the Christiania Art Society, and Norwegian commissions in general dried up.<sup>12</sup> Though there are other factors in play, this suggests that the dramatic subject matter and Balke's handling of it was perhaps more readily accepted as imagery of the exotic North by non-Norwegians.

Again, unlike the Arctic of Friedrich's *Arctic Sea*, where unforgiving nature implacably destroys and forbids humanity's encroachment on its eternal domain, Balke's

*From North Cape* is a contemporary scene. Modern ships ply their maritime trade even here. This is typical of Balke. The majority of his landscapes contain people or evidence of contemporary human activity. Balke's North is often majestic, but it is also a contemporary wonder. The modern infrastructure of steamship tourism and fisheries was what made the North Cape accessible and sustained its community. Tourism to the North Cape accelerated at the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, as it did to the whole Nordic region.<sup>13</sup> Publications made these travels more widely accessible, particularly with British readers who sought to leaven their increasingly urban lives with visions of nature's wonders.<sup>14</sup>

The viewer of Balke's painting stands on the rocky shore admiring the wonder of the cape in the company of other tourists. They do not float above the scene as they so often do in Friedrich's work, where from the perspective of their unique sensitivity they are privileged to see and comprehend the unseen and incomprehensible. Balke's viewer, so the viewpoint implies, is standing on the wet shingle and it is most likely that his companions are other tourists and they all arrived by steamship. Even in scenes where the position of the viewer is more unstable the view is always a contemporary one, without the temporal slippages of National Romanticism, nor the metaphysical slippages of Friedrich's Romanticism.

#### DAHL, BALKE AND THE GOTHIC

Johan Christian Dahl (1758–1857) is in many ways the father figure of Nordic National Romanticism, both in terms of his work and his historiographical reception, following his championing by art historian Andreas Aubert in the 1890s.<sup>15</sup> He did much to establish the paradigm of the national landscape. This can be seen in a letter by him, to his friend and patron Lyder Sagen in 1841:

*A landscape must not only show a particular country or region, it must have the characteristic of this country and its nature, it must speak to the sensitive beholder in a poetic way – it must, so to speak, tell him about the country's nature – way of constructing – its people and their customs – often idyllic, often historic – melancholic, what they were and are[...]*<sup>16</sup>

The quote above illustrates the synonymous overlap between people, landscape and nation within National Romanticism, as well as the uchronic connection between the past and the present, located in the perceived timelessness of the landscape and people. Resident in Germany for the majority of his career, Dahl engaged with the European Romantic tradition of friends such as Friedrich. The national nature of his work is rarely questioned. The fact that the majority are images recalled from memory and sketches in a Dresden studio and informed by a sophisticated understanding of how paintings work, learnt in the Academies in Copenhagen and Dresden, and intended for German clients, does not appear to disrupt this “Norwegianness.” *View From Stalheim* (1842; fig. 2) exemplifies this and a comparison between this work and Balke's illuminates where some of the boundaries lie in terms of what can and cannot be contained within the national landscape.

*View From Stalheim* was painted in Dresden in 1842, for the Norwegian nobleman, Count Wedel Jarlsberg and exhibited in Dresden before being sent up to Christiania.<sup>17</sup> It was based primarily on a sketch from 1826 made on the artist's first major sketching expedition to Norway (fig. 3). The vantage point was inspired by drawings made by Dresden geologist, Carl Friedrich Naumann, who made an expedition to Norway in the early 1820s. Naumann's drawings were accessible to Dahl back in Dresden and used as the basis for a number of compositions in 1823 prior to, and possibly motivating, the first of his own expeditions in 1826.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore possible to frame Dahl's initial



Fig 2. Johan Christian Dahl, *View From Stalheim*, 1842, oil on canvas, 190 x 246 cm, The National Museum, Oslo (Photo: The National Museum/ Jacques Lathion).



Fig 3. Johan Christian Dahl, *View from Stalheim*, July 29, 1826, ink on paper, 10.5 x 16.9 cm, The National Museum (Photo: The National Museum / Anne Hansteen Jarre).

engagement with this landscape through the lens, not of nationalism, but of the pan-European Enlightenment project of scientific exploration.

Topological specificity was clearly important to Dahl. The source sketch is annotated with the names of the various peaks, whose forms are reproduced in the finished painting. The title of the painting and the close relationship to the sketch, made on site, underscore that this was to be a painting of a particular place, not a generic mountain scene. Its identity as a Norwegian landscape is emphasized by the addition of figures in national dress. But there is also a darkness to the painting, a sense of drama, that represents the “poetic” interpretation of the landscape. Dahl’s long, successful career in Germany attests to the existence of a non-Norwegian audience for the wilder, bleaker landscapes of Norway, and the form of beauty they saw there.

The Sublime was a category of beauty that revolved around the stimulation of strong emotional response – awe and fear rather than reverie. It emerged as an aesthetic category in the mid-eighteenth century more or less simultaneously across Europe, in the work of the English aesthetician Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and in the work of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764). The idea struck a chord in contemporary Romantic thought. Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Johan Gottfried Herder’s *Kalligone* (1800), Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) all seek to tease out further the contradictory ramifications of the appeal of the awful.<sup>19</sup>

The Sublime maps onto our enquiry here in two ways. There is a direct relationship to the expansion of domestic tourism. The idea can be traced in the Romantic and Gothic turn in Britain towards northern landscapes, the Lake

District and the Highlands. These landscapes, previously regarded as repellent in their bleak inhospitality, became new destinations for recreational travel and supported by travel guides and a new infrastructure of modes of transport and accommodation.<sup>20</sup> A similar turn can be traced in the Nordic countries in, for example, the formation of organisations such as The Norwegian Tourist Association in 1868. Tourism represents a departure from the normal patterns of everyday experience. Tourism, cartography, topographical prints and albums and landscape painting went inextricably hand in hand in the development of a new appreciation for the rugged vastness of the North in contrast with the halcyon pleasures of the South.<sup>21</sup> The value of the national landscape took on a particular force in the nineteenth century as agricultural reform and, in particular, the expanding forestry industry brought rapid change.<sup>22</sup> The artistic record of the landscape was aimed at a primarily urban middle class who encountered the landscape from the perspective of a real or imagined tourist and through the lens of a set of very contemporary preoccupations.<sup>23</sup>

The Sublime is also an important ingredient in the Gothic, as a category that revolved around the encounter with what is feared, with the strange and the unknown. The Gothic was a cultural turn to the North, carrying associations of medievalism over the rational and classical, darkness over light and superstition and disorder over order. Central to this is the context of European modernity and a new tension between the (increasingly) known and the (persistent) unknown. The modern individual, settled within a stable society, maintained in their desire to be transported, thrilled and terrified in a new sensibility that has been called Gothic.<sup>24</sup> In cultural history terms, the Sublime and the Gothic represent the desire of essentially ordered societies and individuals who did not live in daily fear of survival, to probe at the atavistic fears that continue to exist in the shadows; to enrich the mundane everyday world with a connection to things marvellous and unconquerable. This

is both a turn outwards, beyond daily concerns, and a turn inwards, towards the sense of unease that persisted despite, or because of, modernity. Travel and imagined travel to wild places provided a natural forum for this. There are parallels here to Christoph Hennig's argument that tourism, as a sanctioned deviation from the norm, is the modern cultural equivalent of the Roman Saturnalia or Early Modern Carnival.<sup>25</sup>

Though these ideas were part of a re-validation of northern landscapes, they had to be carefully managed within the evolving genre of the national landscape. If we return to *View from Stalheim*, the deviations from Dahl's topographical sketch of the valley before Stalheim are illuminating. The landscape has been compressed laterally, so that the looming mountains are pressed together, rising even higher and appearing more massive. Their peaks have become a little more distinct and the valley running between them becomes more fissure and less vale. There is a narrative tension introduced by means of the particular weather effect added: the departing storm clouds, the rainbow and the sun breaking through. This is a landscape in which the terrible power of the mountains, their awe-inspiring height and mass, has been emphasised, even exaggerated for dramatic effect. This is not to suggest that this is a Gothic painting, but it is one that employs elements of the Sublime. The feelings of awe inspired by the scene are also intentionally arrested and managed by means of a careful balance between light and dark, hope and fear.

In this work, Dahl fuses the modern, Gothic appetite for the terrible drama of wild places with a rugged, northern arcadia. The village is rendered slightly larger than in the original sketch and evidence of human habitation is pushed a little further up the mountain slopes. The destructive power of nature, exemplified in the blasted tree, is recognised, but countered by the pale wisps of smoke from the chimneys of the hamlet. The connection between the viewer and the

landscape is bifurcated. The viewer stands on a high ridge, with the valley unfolding below. Yet the mountains opposite rise higher still. There is golden sunshine and lowering shadow. The balance comes down on the side of beauty and hope by means of the rainbow, the ultimate symbol of God's promise. But it is the threat of the mountains that makes the succour of the village so attractive and the warm sun on the meadow so valuable.

Balke's work did not seek to imbue nature with the same kind of oblique narrative content as Dahl, nor the more overt metaphysical content of Friedrich. Without this lens, landscape alone did not hold sufficient appeal for either Norwegian or non-Norwegian audiences. He gave up professional painting in the 1850s and by his death in 1887 it was almost forgotten that he had ever been an artist and sold his work to patrons across Europe. He did not, however, cease painting and his later paintings reveal further aspects of his fascination with the North.

Torsten Gunnarson's comment in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *A Mirror of Nature* is illuminating:

*Through him [Dahl], moreover, the mountains became a national symbol of Norway, at that time the only extravagance that this impoverished peasant country could boast. Whereas Dahl had declared it his aim to record the natural environment of his homeland as truthfully and accurately as possible, Balke was, from the 1850s on, to produce depictions that were dramatic and highly expressive in character. Balke's desire to dramatize may have been inspired by his visits to Paris in 1844–47 and London 1849–50.*<sup>26</sup>

In this quote we see the contrast set up with Dahl, whose depiction of Norway is marked, supposedly, by truth and accuracy. Even the acknowledged fact; that partly through his agency, mountains "became" a national symbol, is

framed as an act of revelation rather than mediation. Balke's dramatization of his scenes of northern Norway have, it is implied, something of the foreign about them. Dahl's long residence abroad and interactions with German Romanticism, in contrast, seem to have had no deleterious effect on his Norwegianness. All this indicates how hermetically the myths of nation-building shut the door behind themselves, erasing the processes of invention that lies behind tradition.

Painting for no one, but himself and his friends through the 1860s and 70s, Balke's later works are loosely captured memories of places once visited and never forgotten. Liquid paint floats loosely on the increasingly small picture surface. The marks of sweeping brush or hand coalesce into landscape and then back into paint on canvas or board. He returned again and again to images of the North Cape and to the dramatic form of Mount Stetind, also in Northern Norway. *Mount Stetind in Fog* (1864; fig. 4) is an example of this latter theme. It is a particular place, rather than the pure mindscape of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808–10, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin), and yet it is a landscape taken from a memory over thirty years old and it is little concerned with topography. The starkness of the near-monochrome palette is testament to the power of that memory.

Depth in the painting is elusive. The sea stretches away from where we stand, on shore or low outcrop. Our vantage point is echoed in the group standing on a rock in the mid-ground. But the figures are tiny, their diminutive scale functioning like the figures in a Piranesi drawing to make the mountain still more vertiginously overwhelming, looming out of the fog. They have gathered to look at the mountain and a wrecked ship nearby. This is a motif that Balke uses in a number of his other paintings of Mount Stetind, suggesting a memory of a real sightseeing expedition. In the distance there is a fishing boat, heeling in the wind,

its sails becoming ghostly and translucent as the far shore disappears into the fog bank. Rising above the fog, Mount Stetind is at once ominously dark and craggy and streaked with snow. This whiteness catches the eye and causes the mountain to appear to advance towards us through the fog, even while the receding lines of the surf in the foreground dictate that it must be in the distance.

The wet rock protruding from the sea in the immediate foreground is the last point of stability in a composition that draws us in and sweeps us aside. The signs of humanity, the figures and ships are themselves too small and too ephemeral to offer us an anchor. The footing of the figure group on an outcrop insufficiently distinguished in form from the surrounding sea instead amplifies our own precarious position. This is not the Sublime terrors of God-wrought tempests or meditations on man's place in the universe, but a dream landscape where crisp reality shifts from one moment to the next into danger, into nothingness, and then back. What remains, through decades of returning to the same subject, is the indelible and profound encounter with the North as experienced by Balke, the *Ultima Thule*.

In an astonishing series of small-scale, monochrome works, created through the 1860s and 70s on postcard-sized bits of wood and cardboard, Balke captured this memory-landscape of storm-tossed ships, wheeling gulls and crashing surf. Painting on a white ground, he revived the technique of his youth decorating wooden panelling in prosperous farmhouses. The light is in the ground and the landscape is conjured into place by sweeps of black paint, contoured by means of the bristles themselves. In *Northern Lights over Coastal Landscape* (c.1879; fig. 5) a few broad, vertical brushstrokes reveal the white ground beneath and create the light-fall of the aurora borealis, dancing in a black sky. Lively daubs of black, perhaps applied directly with fingers if the white thumb-print is anything to go by, create the silhouettes of rocks, rising out of a moon-white sea.

Through the 1830s and 1840s Balke strove to accommodate himself to the desires of his contemporaries. He did much that was correct, studying art collections in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin, Munich, Dresden, Paris and London, though he never completed a full academic course of study. He did study directly under Dahl and indirectly under Friedrich, sharing the same lodging house with both Dahl and the aging Friedrich in Dresden. But there were points he either could not or would not compromise on or learn. His work persistently expressed an uncomfortable coexistence of the real and the unreal. Both Dahl and Friedrich shifted at will between the real and the ideal in their canvases, but in such a way that the overall effect accommodated itself to the expectations of the viewer. Balke appears implacably out of step in this regard. His viewpoint was consistently low, so that even when we hover above the sea, the viewer never achieves the omnipotence offered him by Friedrich or Dahl. The contemporary business of rural or maritime life constantly intrudes and prevents a contemplation of unspoilt nature, God or timeless, rural Norway.

The choice of Arctic scenes, like another of the themes Balke fixed upon – coastal lighthouses – did not correspond to the vision of Norway being curated in poetry and song and in the paintings of Dahl, and other National Romantics such as Hans Gude and Adolphe Tidemand. Balke failed to capture the then-as-now, timeless unity of folk and land required by National Romanticism. His landscapes, in their objectivity, failed to address the “we” of the nation. They also seemed little interested in addressing the privileged “I” of Friedrich’s Romantic subject.<sup>27</sup> Balke could not shake off the memories of what he saw, memories he shared again and again. He painted what it was like for him to be there and see what he saw. And, latterly, what it was like to remember this experience decades later.



Fig 4. Peder Balke, *Mount Stetind in Fog*, 1864, oil on canvas, 71.5 x 58.5 cm, The National Museum, Oslo (Photo: The National Museum/ Frode Larsen).



Fig 5. Peder Balke, *Northern Lights over Coastal Landscape*, c. 1879, oil on canvas 10.5 x 12 cm, The National Museum, Oslo (Photo: The National Museum).

### WILLUMSEN, JOTUNHEIM, AND THE GOTHIC OBJECT

Ultimately, visions of the far North and of the truly inhospitable mountains and icefields are incompatible with the national visions being created in the Nordic countries. To survive, humanity must differentiate itself from wild and hostile nature and resist it, even if that wildness continues to hold certain compelling attractions. These attractions lie beneath the surface of the ominous clouds, shadowed mountains, and moonlit lakes that do appear in National Romantic landscapes, but never without recourse to shelter and a break in the cloud to offer relief. National Romanticism required viewers to identify themselves with the landscape and project their hearts and minds into it as a beloved space. To be reminded of the wild and hostile nature that lies beyond and that resists efforts to tame it; that, in its sublime magnitude, mocks attempts to differentiate one's self from its vastness, threatens to disrupt the necessary suppressions that survival, civilization and nation paradoxically demand.

In the Gothic, the subject is thrilled by the glimpse of this threat. It is on this basis that *Arctic Sea* holds its appeal. The vastness of the icefields, their palpable danger in the chaotic and jagged forms of ice, and then the terrible realisation that the shadows within their crevasses contain the mangled remains of a lost ship and the corpses of all those aboard, plays out like a Gothic plot, as the darkness of a hidden chamber resolves into a scene of past horrors. But this thrill becomes more unacceptable, the more real the threat of danger. Therefore, where the veneer of civilisation is more recent and precarious, the further north you go, and the atavistic dread it conjures up is closer to the surface, the reminder of the hostility and implacability of northern nature becomes more difficult to accommodate, along with the requirement to love and collectively identify with it.

The challenges and inner conflicts and crises engendered by real encounters with the North are revealed in the remarkable work, *Jotunheim* (1893–94), by Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (Fig 6). Willumsen was a Danish artist from Copenhagen. Like Balke he never completed his academic studies as a painter, but pursued his own course of artistic education abroad, this time in Paris. *Jotunheim* represents Willumsen's attempt to come to terms with his encounter with the inhospitable North. The Jotunheim is a high Alpine range in southern Norway. Not the Arctic, then, but not a domesticated landscape. Willumsen travelled there from Paris in 1892, completing and exhibiting the first phase of *Jotunheim* back in Paris in 1893.<sup>28</sup>

For Willumsen, the trip was challenging physically and emotionally. He sought in his landscape painting to capture the impact of the trip. It is not a view from a particular known vantage point, but it is a specific, rather than a generic mountain scene. It is a fundamentally bleak outlook, without any signs of human habitation. Indeed, the impenetrability of the landscape was a key part of what Willumsen wanted to capture. His commentary on the painting, written for its exhibition in 1895 begins: “The clouds drifted away and I found myself on the edge of an abyss, looking over a mountain landscape in the far North, grim, harsh, covered by eternal snow and ice, a world uninhabitable by human beings.”<sup>29</sup> In his diary he commented on distant peaks, “so high that no one can reach them because the air is so thin and the cold so fierce and the way so far that those who set out will die halfway. One must be satisfied with the sight of those peaks from down below.”<sup>30</sup>

Drawn, as he was, to the wildness and beauty of the landscape, the overwhelming impression was that man was not welcome and did not belong. Willumsen recalled that, one day in the mountains he got lost in fog:



Fig 6. Jens Ferdinand Willumsen, *Jotunheim*, 1893–94, oil on canvas, mahogany, zinc and enamel on copper, 275.5 x 152.5 cm (Photo: J. F. Willumsens Museum / Anders Sune Berg).



*The distant mountains on the other side of Tyin Lake looked so strangely compelling that I absolutely had to go over to them and see them in more detail. I did a little walking tour that lasted a few days. I came to a valley through which ran a stream that came from a glacier. I worked my way laboriously up between the broken boulders and finally came upon the ice [...]. The weather changed and the large bank of dark fog that came rolling in from all sides, from above and from below, seemed to contain evil spirits. They pounced on me and rushed past. The whole thing was terrifying, and I was struck with horror, gripped by a powerful fear that I could not overcome. It was as if all the rocks were alive and sought me. I thought that behind each one lay a monster who would kill me. I panicked, packed up my belongings and turned and crashed into a wild run that got wilder and wilder down the gorge. Only once I reached the valley, I regained my equilibrium when I saw some greenery. It was the bleakness of the two colours, or rather lack of colours (black and white only was all you see up there) that had the eerie effect.<sup>31</sup>*

Willumsen's *Jotunheim* tries to capture this duality of attraction and repulsion. The landscape is inhospitable, without vegetation or signs of human presence. It suggests awe at the power of nature, but nothing that makes that landscape knowable and comprehensible as a national symbol. It remains disorientating, inaccessible and incomprehensible. The vista of the lake and rising mountains fractures into black-and-white jags that disrupt the sense of recession. As well as the strange reflections in the lake, which defy the eye's focus and create confusion, there are also gouts of smoke or vapour rising out of various points of the painting, both rock and lake. The viewer gropes for meaning in the painting, seeing glimpses of totemic animals or faces in the patches of snow and ice. In these opaque

patterns Willumsen invites the viewer to share his own fear, disorientation and awe in the face of a landscape of extreme power.

Willumsen grapples here with a reality that has no place in National Romanticism. It lies closer to the Gothic. Recent studies of the Gothic have turned to Julia Kristeva's theory of the Abject to explore the complicated dynamics of intentional disruption and subversion of stability played with there.<sup>32</sup> The Abject is that which must be put away from us in order that we become whole and bounded individual subjects. It is the unacknowledgeable reality of birth, death, decay and bodily emissions that signal that the body of the self is not as inviolable and bounded as it would wish to be.

*There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.<sup>33</sup>*

Applied in cultural terms, this idea can be used to frame the intolerable realities that lie beneath the skin of the body of the nation and that are unspeakable and experienced only as aversions and pollution or foreignness that must be rejected, cannot be recognised as coming from within. The "naturalness" of the national body, as created in nationalist discourses including National Romanticism, lends itself in a number of ways to parallels with the psychological paradigm of the infantile identification of the self. The nation was always there. Its *not being there* is unthinkable, a violation. It is also frequently conjured in terms of a body and in terms of birth and the necessity to revive it or preserve it from decay.

Speaking of British nation-building in the eighteenth century, the suppression of Britain's Catholic past and fear of Catholic insurgents, Robert Miles writes:

*[...]one might say that nationalism and the heritage industry are part and parcel of the same process of historical amnesia and nation building. The general aim of nationalist ideology is to create a myth of unitary national origin, whereby the present "congruent" polity is understood to be the manifestation of an ancient culture. Nothing must contradict this narrative, including, or indeed, especially, evidence of past diversity, heterogeneity, and conflict.<sup>34</sup>*

Miles turns to the theory of the Abject as a model for the horror/repression/fascination with the fear of Catholic insurgency expressed in British Gothic art and literature, where it manifested in the form of decadent Catholic aristocrats, monks and ghoulish ritual. In relation to Nordic nationalisms, it was not sectarian history, or even a history of mobile borders and allegiances that was most dangerous to the integrity of the national body. Instead what was abjected was the truth that life in the North was often far from idyllic and that, for many, poverty, hunger and unrelenting cold remained real dangers. Population shifts from the countryside to the cities and immigration from Scandinavia to America revealed the challenges of living off the land. Hardships that had to be countered by images of rural utopia and togetherness.<sup>35</sup>

The ice-giants of the sagas, the Jötunar, after whom the *Jotunheim* was named in the early years of Norwegian National Romanticism in the 1820s, could be seen as familiar figures from beloved childhood tales, but their original form as an embodiment of the endless battle with the forces of Winter was a reality that lay beneath.

Willumsen laboured extensively in *Jotunheim* to express and then suppress this encounter with the darker side of the North. Kelly Hurley, writing about the persistent attraction towards the Abject, comments on the desire to entertain, temporarily, intolerable possibilities. It is the frame that makes this bearable and, the more robust the frame, the more safely the viewer can engage.<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that the second phase of work on *Jotunheim* was the construction, by Willumsen, of an elaborate narrative framing structure. To right and left the harsh landscape is framed by allegorical figures. Willumsen described them in his 1895 commentary as follows:

*The figures in the relief on the left represent those who determinedly seek through learning and the intellect to find the connection between the infinitely great and the infinitely small. The infinitely great is represented by a stellar nebula, the infinitely small by some microbes. [...] The relief on the right represents a contrast to the relief on the left: pointlessness; at the bottom two men, one of whom is weaving a piece of wickerwork which the other is just as quickly unravelling; in the middle a group of indifferent figures; at the top a figure representing a chimeric dream.*<sup>37</sup>

Superficially, this would seem to be a division between intellect and reason, and emotion and sensuality, a mapping out of the competing values of the North and the South. But Willumsen's description is undercut profoundly by his own imagery. The incomprehensible graphic renderings of nebula and microbes and the stiff, hieratic gestures of the men on the left contrast markedly with the energy and joy of the figures on the right. The men of reason appear transfixed, staring longingly at the laughing figures opposite. Even the two men weaving and unweaving are seemingly more engaged in the dexterous operation of their task

than the men on the left, begging the question of where the pointlessness lies.

Tellingly, the mountain range that the frame is built to contain breaks free from its bounds and the peaks in the background of the painting are repeated in enamelled copper, bursting forth from the upper edge of the frame. Willumsen appears to be at great pains to mediate this image, first through elaborate framing and then through accompanying textual commentary. Yet he also desired to remain true to the sensations of his terrifying encounter and so all his devices unweave themselves and the implacability of the mountains reasserts itself.

Willumsen's experience was one of losing bodily integrity. The fear of being absorbed and destroyed by a careless and powerful natural world. Kristeva sees, at the root of the Abject, the horror of birth, between being and non-being, between wholeness and being part of the mother, the fear of reabsorption into her body, loss of integrity and self. Artists who come too close to revealing that which is Abject are shunned. This is, arguably, what happened to Balke and what Willumsen foresaw and sought to guard against when he added the frame to his *Jotunheim* landscape.

The emotional pull between viewer and landscape has been frequently theorised in masculinist terms, with the omnipotent male viewer staking claim to a landscape implicitly gendered as feminine.<sup>38</sup> The trope of male viewer and the motherland and mother nature has been varied at times by the land as widow,<sup>39</sup> or as beloved or bride, all of which require male protection and veneration.<sup>40</sup> The idea of the Gothic and the Abject allows an exciting but uncomfortable alternative to surface. Not a loving and beloved, feminine nature, but something more primordial. This land-as-mother has the power to destroy and to claim back into herself any or all of her offspring. She cannot be known or captured, only encountered with suitable

humility. The appeal of this encounter lies in the desire of the modern spectator to court danger, in a way that the ordered confines of modern life do not ordinarily allow. That artists who strayed too far in this direction were regarded as particularly subject to foreign influences can be understood as a part of a desire to put away from oneself that which they represented. This is not to say that the influence of Turner in the work of Balke or Gauguin in the work of Willumsen was not there. But, rather, to point out that the influence of Friedrich on the work of Dahl and the influence of Jules Bastien-Lepage on the work of many later National Romantic painters was equally present, but assimilated as a mark of their modernity, rather than as a troubling foreign influence.

I am not trying to argue for a new category of Gothic landscape. A Gothic sensibility permeated National Romanticism (and Romanticism) on certain terms. Looking at these terms, at the successful and less successful integration of these elements, reveals the challenge of harnessing together the appeal of the haunting North and that of homeland. The National Romanticism of the Nordic countries celebrates northern distinctiveness, but ameliorates, as Dahl's example shows, the more terrifying aspects of the North. The perilous inhospitality of the North must be set aside, the trolls and giants recalled fondly, and yet a frisson of this ancient dread must remain to titillate the modern, urban audience. It is by considering deviations from the main path of art historical narratives, the oddities that do not fit, that we can challenge perception of the truth and accuracy of the dominant narratives in the representations of national landscape.

The Gothic was a practice of giving voice to that which had to be kept at bay, uncomfortable truths that could not be allowed to intrude. At the same time, these unwelcome realities exercised a persistent fascination. If the South was order and clarity, then perhaps the North was wildness

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and chaos, possibly more than a mere poetic reading could tame. Reflecting on these issues allows us to recognise the exclusions maintained by National Romanticism and the persistence of these exclusions in the historiography and wider culture. As art history grows away from national histories and towards a plurality of new histories, we face a challenge, not simply of inserting outsiders into the canon – as is now happening to Balke – but of revealing and tackling the very contingent nature of the canon itself.

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by the author.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bergh, 1896, cited in H. A. Barton, *Sweden and Visions of Norway: Politics and Culture, 1814–1905* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 146

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Koskimies-Envall, *Vaurastuva kansakunta kuvina 1869–1899: Arvid Liljelund, hänen laatukuvamaalausensa, niiden todellisuuspohja ja vastaanotto* (Helsinki: Hagelstam, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Riitta Konttinen, Naistaiteilijat Suomessa: keskiajalta modernismin murrokseen (Helsinki: Tammi 2007); Vibeke Røstorp, *Le mythe du retour: les artistes scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitets förlag, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Akos Moravansky, “Magic Mountains: Constructing the Geography of Modernity,” in *Vernacular Art in Central Europe: International Conference, 1–5 October, 1997*, ed. Jacek Purchla (Cracow: International Cultural Center, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> *Peder Balke: Painter of Northern Light*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 10 April – 10 July 2017; *Paintings by Peder Balke*, ed. Marit Ingeborg Lange, Knut Ljøgodt, and Christopher Riopelle (London: National Gallery Company, 2014); *Peder Balke: vision og revolusjon*, ed. Marit Ingeborg Lange, Knut Ljøgodt, and Christopher Riopelle (Tromsø: Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, 2014); Per Kværne, *Un peintre norvégien au Louvre: Peder Balke (1804–1887) et son temps = A Norwegian Painter in the Louvre: Peder Balke (1804–1887) and His Times* (Oslo: Novus Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Marit Ingeborg Lange, “Peder Balke: Vision and Revolution,” in *Paintings by Peder Balke*, ed. Marit Ingeborg Lange, Knut Ljøgodt, and Christopher Riopelle (London: National Gallery Company, 2014), 9–19

<sup>8</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600–1850*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Russell A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818–1875* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/sammlung-online/caspar-david-friedrich/das-eismeer>, accessed on 21 Feb 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Lange “Peder Balke,” 18, 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 36–37.

<sup>13</sup> H.A. Barton, “Iter Scandinavicum: Foreign Travellers’ Views of the Late Eighteenth-Century North,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 68 no.1 (1996): 1–18.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Fjågesund and Ruth A. Symes, *The Northern Utopia: British Perceptions of Norway in the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003); Kathryn Walchester, *Gamle Norge and Nineteenth-Century British Women Travellers in Norway* (London: Anthem 2014); Giuseppe Acerbi, *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland, to the North Cape, in 1798 and 99* (London: Joseph Mawman, 1802); A. F. Skioldebrand, *A Picturesque Journey to the North Cape* (London: J.M. Richardson, 1813); Arthur de Capell Brooke, *Travels through Sweden, Norway and Finmark, to the North Cape* (London: Rodwell & Martin, 1823).

<sup>15</sup> Andreas Aubert, *Professor Dahl: et stykke av aarhundredets kunst -og kulturhistorie* (Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1893); Andreas Aubert, *Den nordiske naturfølelse og professor Dahl hans kunst og dens stilling i aarhundredets utvikling* (Kristiania: Aschehoug, 1894).

<sup>16</sup> John Christian Dahl, “Letter to Sagen of 6 April 1841,” reproduced in Marie Lødrup Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl, 1788–1857: life and works*. Vol. 1 (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1988), 250–51.

<sup>17</sup> Bang, *Johan Christian Dahl*, 289

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81, 202

<sup>19</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Bell and John Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity*. (Westport: Praeger, 2010), 5–11.

<sup>21</sup> Brenna, “King of the Road: Describing Norwegian Landscapes in the Eighteenth Century,” Mari Hvattum, Janike Kampeveld Larsen, Brita Brenna, and Beate Elvebakk, eds. *Routes, Roads and Landscapes* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 13–26; Maunu Häyrynen, “The Kaleidoscopic View: The Finnish National Landscape Imagery,” *National Identities* 2, no. 1 (2000): 51–59.

<sup>22</sup> Oscar Julius Falnes, *National Romanticism in Norway* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1933), 58–61

<sup>23</sup> Ville Lukkarinen and Annika Waenerberg, *Suomi-kuwasta mielenmaisemaan: kansallismaisemat 1800- ja 1900-luvun vaihteiden maalaustaiteessa* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> David Punter, *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Christoph Henning, *Reiselust: Touristen, Tourismus und Urlaubskultur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Torsten Gunnarsson, “Introduction,” *A Mirror of Nature: Nordic landscape painting*, ed. Leena Ahtola-Moorhouse, Frode Ernst Haverkamp, and Torsten Gunnarsson (Odder: Narayana Press, 2006), 16.

<sup>27</sup> Julian Jason Haladyn, “Friedrich’s ‘Wanderer’: Paradox of the Modern Subject,” *RACAR: Revue D’art Canadienne / Canadian Art*

*Review* 41, no. 1 (2016): 47–61.

<sup>28</sup> Roald Nasgaard, “‘Seul en Plein Nature’ Les perspectives dans l’Europe du nord,” in Guy Cogeval, et al. *Au-Delà des étoiles: Les paysages mystique de Monet à Kandinsky* (Paris: Musée D’Orsay, 2017), 204–209.

<sup>29</sup> Ernst Mentze and J. F. Willumsen, *J.F. Willumsen: mine Erindringer fortalt til Ernst Mentze* (Copenhagen: Berlingske forlag, 1953), 100–101.

<sup>30</sup> Unpublished notebook in J. F. Willumsen Museum, cited in Pedersen Troels Branth, *Bjergtaget: J.F. Willumsen i Norge 1892* (Århus: Klim, 2006), 38.

<sup>31</sup> Unpublished notebook in J. F. Willumsen Museum, cited in Lise Buurgård, *J.F. Willumsen: bjerget, kvinden, selvet* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1999), 41.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Miles, “Abjection, Nationalism and the Gothic,” in *The Gothic*, ed. Fred Botting (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 51–69; Kirsty Macdonald, “‘This Desolate and Appalling Landscape’: The Journey North in Contemporary Scottish Gothic,” *Gothic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 37–48.

<sup>33</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1).

<sup>34</sup> Miles, “Abjection,” 51.

<sup>35</sup> Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 58–61.

<sup>36</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Mentze and Willumsen, *J.F. Willumsen*, 100–101

<sup>38</sup> Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Marc Cabal, “Faith culture and sovereignty: Irish nationality and its development 1558–1625,” in *British consciousness and identity: the making of Britain, 1533–1707*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and P. R. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 112–139; Smith 2003, 151–154.

<sup>40</sup> Johanna Valenius, *Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2004), 99–119.