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**Fridtjof Nansen's *Farthest North*:  
Scientific Report or Personal Account?**

The Norwegian *Fram* Expedition towards the North Pole (1893-1896) is perhaps the most mythical expedition in Norwegian polar exploration. Nansen's creative idea was to let the ship *Fram* freeze in northeast outside Siberia, drift northwest with the sea streams across the North Pole and out of the ice between Spitsbergen and Greenland. When Nansen after one year and a half icebound realised it would take years to reach the North Pole like this, he decided that two men should leave the ship and head for the Pole. On March 14 1895 Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen set course northwards with skis, sleighs and dogs; they brought food for 100 days for themselves and 30 days for the dogs. They reached 86 °14' north on April 7, but realised the ice and weather conditions made the task impossible. On their way back they had to spend one winter on Franz Josef Land in a cabin they built with rocks, ice and snow. This two-man expedition lasted for fifteen months, and altogether the *Fram* expedition lasted for three years.

**Polar exploration literature**

The year after they returned, Nansen published the travelogue *Farthest North* (1897),<sup>1</sup> a voluminous book that contains a multiplicity of different discourses. This narrative became immensely popular in Norway, selling over 20 000 copies.<sup>2</sup> The formation of the myths connected with Fridtjof Nansen and other polar heroes was important for the Norwegian cultural history, and the image of the Arctic became part of the national consciousness in the late

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<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian: Fridtjof Nansen: *Fram over Polhavet I og II*, H. Aschehoug & Co., Kristiania 1897. Here all quotations are from the English edition, *Farthest North. The Exploration of the Fram 1893-1896*, Edinburgh 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Wærp. 2007: 98.

19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; as a result, the expedition accounts became an important part of a national discourse.

It is commonly assumed that travel literature in the 19th century, produced by missionaries, explorers, scientists or orientalists, was characterized by a focus on facts and knowledge. Throughout the 20th century, travel literature is more often given the form of memoirs than manuals. As for fiction or imaginative writing, there is a transformation from detailed, realistic texts with a moral or didactic intention into impressionism: a literature concerned with the consciousness and experiences of the traveller.<sup>1</sup>

Being an exploration account from the 19th century, *Farthest North* is on the one hand an objective account based on facts and details. To prove the route, the final destination and the scientific results – and emphasise that all these experiences were true - the book gives a detailed account of all preparations and equipment, the designs for the ship, temperature, the ice-drifting, the soundings, the gathering of different sea animals, etc. The discourse is represented by tables of scientific results and measures, new mappings and corrections of old maps. Photographs and illustrations, some of them even by Nansen himself, contribute to reinforce the truthfulness of the account. On the other hand, the travelogue gives evidence of a dramatic and outstanding expedition, and is a story about courage, strength and an almost unbelievable deed, which ended in the farthest north record of the time. In particular, the fifteen months' sleigh journey undertaken by Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen is adventurous. This part of the narrative resembles the pattern we find in other kinds of popular literature.

#### **Official and private discourses**

Exploration narratives are consequently characterized by multiplicity, and one striking feature is that totally different attitudes and motivations coexist in the text; perhaps we could

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<sup>1</sup> Carr. 2002.

characterize this as for instance one official and one private discourse? First, it is obvious when reading the narrative that this is the voice of one man, Nansen himself. There are a few exceptions: His captain, Sverdrup, is left about 100 pages at the end of Nansen's own narrative to tell about *Fram's* drifting after Nansen had left, and the Russian trader of Norwegian origin, Alexander Ivanovitch Trontheim, is given five pages under the title "Trontheim's narrative" to tell about the long and difficult journey to get the sled-dogs for the expedition to Khabarova in time.

The rest of the crew are mentioned and presented in the introduction, but are hardly mentioned or heard elsewhere. And when they are referred to, or heard, in the text, it seems to be either in humorous stories that make them look quite stupid, for instance when meeting polar bears or trying to run dog-sleighs, or in passages which stress Nansen's excellence, as in this conversation between Nansen and Pettersen, where Pettersen begs Nansen to include him on the ski-expedition towards the North Pole:

But there might be worse than hardships, Pettersen. It would more than likely mean risking your life.'

'I don't care for that either. A man has got to die some time.'

[...]

'But remember that a journey northward over the ice would be no child's play.'

'No, I know that well enough, but if it was with you I shouldn't be afraid. It would never do if we had to manage alone. We'd be sure to go wrong; but it's quite a different thing, you see, when there is one to lead that you know has been through it all before. (210)

First, this tells us that Nansen is the main character in his own account. This is of course not particularly path-breaking news, since Nansen is the indisputable boss on his own expedition, but it still is in striking contrast to for instance Hjalmar Johansen's narrative after the journey. Johansen's narrative is the voice of a

*collective of men* trying to reach the Pole and bring back glory and honour to the nation. Johansen's account is characterized by almost a complete absence of subjective or personal meditations. It describes the men working together for each other and the nation, and this collective voice is extremely loyal towards Nansen, hence the title of Johansen's account: *With Nansen in the North*, in Norwegian the title is even more curious: *Selv-anden paa 86<sup>o</sup>14'* (the world 'selv-anden' indicating a positioning below Nansen, second-rate).

Another distinctive feature in *Farthest North* related to its subjective and personal style is all the references to literature, in particular old Norwegian or Norse lyrics, but also classic European literature and works of different philosophers. And Nansen's narrative itself, *as literature*, resembles in many respects the fiction in the 1890s in Norway. It is the voice and reflections of one, at times, very sensitive narrator; the surroundings and the situation are described in poetic terms; the nature is sublime and the narrator's reflections often focus on terms like heaven, hell, divinity and death:

I seem to be sitting here in solitude listening to the music of one of nature's mighty harpstrings. Her grand symphonies peal forth through the endless ages of the universe, now in the tumultuous whirl of busy life, now in the stiffening coldness of death, as in Chopin's Funeral March; and we – we are the minute, invisible vibrations of the strings in this mighty music of the universe, ever changing, yet ever the same. (179)

Emotional passages like this, focusing on solitude, nature and life are frequent in the text, as are confessions of his longing: "When one thinks of how short life is, and that one came away from it all of one's own free will, and remembers, too, that another is suffering the pain of constant anxiety, 'true, true till death.'" (216) This strongly subjective narrator not only creates a personal style

in the account, it also contributes to the creation of a well-known myth in travel literature: the lonesome traveller.<sup>1</sup>

This journey is Nansen's own masterstroke, it is his plan and his expedition, and that is made clear from the beginning of the narrative. If we take a look at how Nansen's plan and method for reaching the North Pole are described, we find that he is reinforcing the originality of his plan in the introduction, as opposed to the earlier, unsuccessful attempts to reach the Pole. He does this by, as an example, referring to the American General Greely's reaction to his plan; Greely wrote: "Arctic exploration is sufficiently credited with rashness and danger in its legitimate and sanctioned methods, without bearing the burden of Dr. Nansen's illogical scheme of self-destruction"(25).<sup>2</sup> Then he presents his own. Even the worst possible scenario, that the ship is to be lost under the ice-pressure, is brushed aside: "For the success of such an expedition two things only are required: good clothing and plenty of food [...]" (16)

Using the power of representation Nansen presents this plan as brilliant, original, entirely his own and necessarily successful. No wonder that he gets more and more nervous and anxious about the expedition becoming a failure during the ice-drifting:

We are lying motionless – no drift. How long will this last? [...] Spring is coming, but brings no joys with it. Here it is as lonely and cold as ever. One's soul freezes. Seven more years of such life – or say only four – how will the soul appear then? [...] I know this is all a morbid mood; but still this inactive, lifeless monotony, without any change, wrings one's very soul. No struggle, no possibility of struggle! [...] What would I not give for a single day of struggle – for even a moment of danger! Still I must wait, and watch the drift [...]  
(175)

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<sup>1</sup> Among others: Melberg. 2005: 236.

<sup>2</sup> The American General Greely, leader of an unsuccessful North Pole Expedition 1881-1884.

Nevertheless, and despite this desperation, he also claims he has proven the expedition's success already the first winter: the ship is drifting and both Fram and his crew are in top shape, he writes:

I laugh at the scurvy; no sanatorium better than ours.  
I laugh at the ice; we are living as it were in an impregnable castle.  
I laugh at the cold; it is nothing. (334)

As we have seen, the narrator is concerned with presenting one voice, one protagonist in a personal style. At the same time, it also becomes clear that Nansen had some other expectations to attend to, concerning national circumstances. At the time, Norway wanted to become not only an independent nation, but also one of great account, not least scientifically. It was very important to define the nation in relation to Sweden, by, for instance, being first on the Poles. Colonialism is closely related to exploration and exploration narratives. But, regarding the *polar* explorations, the discursive story differs from the colonial discourses about the explorations of the African continent or the Far East, as for instance Edward Said have analyzed. The main reason is that the North Pole is uninhabited, empty, located on drifting pack ice. In *Gender on Ice* Lisa Bloom points to the fact that the absence of land and people made it possible for the discovery of the North Pole to *avoid* political and commercial regards. Nevertheless, Bloom claims that the expeditons towards the North Pole represent a *distinct form* of colonialism and imperialism, through the exploitation of indigenous people.<sup>1</sup>

The exploration narratives about the *Fram* expedition contain few meetings with indigenous people. In Khabarova, they meet with the Samoyedes, but Nansen himself does not actually interact with them. Considering the fact that he had learnt so much from the Inuit during the winter on Greenland 1888-1889 about survival in Arctic and extreme surroundings, this is quite interesting: does he feel fully qualified already or do not the Samoyedes measure up

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom. 1993.

to his expectations of indigenous people? Although he never actually meets with the Samoyedes, he nevertheless gives a not very flattering description of them:

During the afternoon the howling and screaming began, and increased as time went on. We did not need to be told that the serious part of the festival had now began [sic]. Some of the Samoyedes tore about over the plain their reindeer teams like furious animals. They could not sit on their sledges, but lay on them or were dragged behind them, howling. Some of my comrades went on shore and brought back anything but an edifying account of the state of things. Every single man and woman appeared to be drunk, reeling about the place. One young Samoyede in particular had made an ineffaceable (?) impression on them. He mounted a sledge, lashed at the reindeer, and drove amuck in among the tents, over the tied-up dogs, foxes, and whatever came in his way; he himself fell off the sledge, was caught in the reins, and dragged behind, shrieking, through sand and clay. (59)

This is, in essence, all there is about indigenous people in this narrative. This may seem strange, considering how important meeting with the Other often is in travel literature. On the other hand, this conforms to the pattern in the narrative: the most important, not to say only, voice is the one of the protagonist, Nansen. Perhaps this could be seen as a strategy to undermine the presence of other people in the Arctic and thus to position himself and the expedition as more outstanding?

**Towards the end.**

Nansen does make a point of the national duty they have to serve, but this is more and more rare throughout the narrative. Even the dramatic decision to leave the ship and conquer the Pole is made more or less a personal issue. In addition to the heroic and national aspects of conquering the North Pole, Nansen had his own reasons wanting to leave the ship: he was bored and homesick. He becomes desperate about leaving, which again can be seen in his

planning of the sleigh-journey. When trying to foresee what obstacles they could experience, he finds it is mainly four:

WHAT UNFORESEEN OBSTACLES MAY CONFRONT US?

1. The ice may be more impracticable than was supposed
2. We may meet with land
3. The dogs may fail us, may sicken, or freeze to death
4. We ourselves may suffer from scurvy (229)

His eagerness to set out is demonstrated in his none-scientific, almost irresponsible rejection of these obstacles: "I can see no reason why the ice should be more impracticable [...]. But should this be so – very well, we must take what chance we find. [...]" He does not explain *why* he cannot see any reason, neither does he present a solution if it is to happen anyway. And further: "Even supposing all the dogs to fail us, we could manage to get along by ourselves pretty well. [...]". About scurvy he says: "Peary and Astrup did not suffer from scurvy." (229-230)

These "arguments" make it clear that Nansen is extremely eager to start off. And the North Pole is perhaps for him only a necessary stop on the most important journey, the journey home; because when they finally are forced to turn, he is not very disappointed, he actually feels relieved and is celebrating: "On this northernmost camping ground we indulged in a banquet, consisting of lobsouse, bread and butter, dry chocolate [...] and then, with a delightful and unfamiliar feeling of repletion, crept into the dear bag, our best friend." (298)

Johansen is, in comparison, clearly very disappointed, both on behalf of himself and the nation:

It was our hearts' desire to go as far as we could. But it gave us some solace to know that we had unveiled some of the darkness that surrounds this part of the world. [...] Monday April 8 we turned and headed towards Franz Joseph Land, leaving behind on the world's most northernmost camp site,

two little flags, one symbolising the union, the other a pure one.<sup>1</sup>

To briefly sum up, *Farthest North* is an exploration account which contains a multiplicity of discourses. Nansen is aware of what we can call the official side of this account, containing particularly the national and the scientific discourses. The polar exploration was a matter of honour for Norway, it was about independence and about asserting the country as a scientific stronghold. In addition, polar exploration was considered honourable because it was *heroic*; the scientific results were accompanied by dramatic travelogues from battles of survival in the most inhospitable surroundings on the planet, and maybe the most important value that is found in the travelogues, is the *symbolic* value.<sup>2</sup> And this is an aspect of the narrative Nansen obviously attends to: On the one hand he is trying to represent the journey as a deed, the setting of a record and achieving scientific results as a national matter; on the other hand, Nansen creates the myth of himself as a lonesome traveller, a heroic explorer and survivor.

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<sup>1</sup> Johansen.1898: 172-175. Translation by Hege Wanner.

<sup>2</sup> Fulsås. 2004: 179-180.

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