

Contributions to Understanding the North

Literatura Borealis: Circumpolar Themes in the Work of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää

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The Northern Review #25/26 (Summer 2005): 125–134.

When someday—as I do believe—the cultures of Arctic peoples are researched as a whole, we will be astonished by all they have in common. Not only externally, but also spiritually. Which brings up thoughts about the connections among Arctic peoples. The Arctic is a highway. The tree limit, the scarcity of trees, freed people to walk. Particularly in the winter time. Which connected people physically, communicatively. And mythically. The long nights of winter free people to tell. And to listen.

– Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, “The Sun, the Thunder, the Fires of Heaven.”

In the city of the Neva, named after Lenin, yesterday’s illiterate children of the taiga and tundra were soon reborn as it were. They did not forget about fire and living trees, but books taught them a new kind of hunting. A page is like snow. Letters are like tracks. Whose tracks? Not an animal’s. Thoughts have walked across a page. There are large and small beasts, valuable and worthless animals. All of them leave tracks. But not every track leads to a big catch. It is dangerous and difficult to follow the tracks of a large beast, but there is also an element of pleasure and excitement. And a hunter tracks a large beast with intense strength and passion in order to claim a big catch.

A page is like snow. Letters are like tracks. If thoughts have walked across a page, what were they: great or small, good or evil, transient or eternal?

– Yuri Shestalov, describing his fellow Indigenous Siberian Soviet writers in “A Stride Across A Thousand Years.”

Literature in the North

In the Arctic and Subarctic there are universal cultural constants among both Indigenous peoples of the Far North and their histories of colonization and development. It is my contention that northern literature takes its elements from the northern landscape and, thus, is characterized by universal features implicit in such cold margins. Northern literature, from both the ethnographic record and from contemporary, authored, imaginative literature, will reveal universal features that warrant a definition of northern literature as a genre. An examination of literatures from Siberia to Sápmi to Nunavut and beyond may prove valuable in developing a sustainable cultural resource for the Circumpolar North. The work of Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää provides particularly compelling materials for an examination of circumpolar themes in northern literature.

I start from a premise that literature of the North may be characterized

by survival and by stark contrast: light and dark; heat and cold; beauty and severity. Nature is not merely a setting, but also an actor. For instance, Veli-Pekka Lehtola, a Sámi historian, maintains that Laplander literature of the 1920s and 1930s is essentially a regional literature, written in situ, its aesthetic constructs deriving, however, from neo-Romantic models. He emphasizes the role of the Lapland landscape in shaping worldviews and vice versa:

Nature and landscape are the basic motifs in settler literature of the kind represented in the case of Lapland, which leads [Lapland author] Erno Paasilinna to describe his overall impression in the following terms: "The main character in the literature of Lapland is always the landscape, nature, the environment. The principal actor is seldom a human being. He is merely a façade, an element of nature, a bystander or a victim." This does not mean, however, that we are dealing with pure descriptions of nature, on the contrary. The concept of nature carries a strong implication that this description represents the author's outlook on the world and the universe. It is a matter of the author's relation to the landscape, a human perception of nature. The landscapes...are frequently inward-looking; they are mental landscapes, maps of a state of mind. (299-300)

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the Sámi poet, has certainly considered issues of northernness in his thoughts about Indigenous cultures, as he articulates in his essay, "The Sun, the Thunder, the Fires of Heaven." Other scholars also recognize such commonalities. Danish scholar, Jens Dahl, in a paper delivered to an international seminar on the Identity, Environment and Rights of Indigenous Peoples at Helsinki University in 1995, defines concisely the problem of identity and the meaning of territory for Indigenous peoples in the Circumpolar North:

The [territorial] identity of the Arctic peoples to the environment or the nature, to the land, the water, the ice—is an identity of occupation, of culture and of history. This identity is not based on legal concepts like property or use-rights, but on knowledge, common heritage and on control. This identity can be inherited and it can be destroyed, but it cannot be sold nor mortgaged.... Identity with the territory finds its expression within acts of self-determination, and the right to have one's identity is inextricably anchored to the right of self-determination. (17)

Thus, northern Indigenous identity clings much more closely to sense of place than does Western identity, dependent as it is on ownership. This dichotomy between Aboriginal and Western severely marginalizes Indigenous cultures.

Canadian Tony Penikett has thought deeply about such marginalization in the North and explores it in his article "The Idea of North." Penikett highlights the distinction between a northern frontier and a northern homeland (187), a dichotomy first articulated by Thomas R. Berger in

his famous 1977 Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. For European explorers, the North has been a frontier; concurrently, that self-same North is also a homeland for northern Indigenous peoples.

Because of the extreme climatic and geographic conditions of the North, and because of the exploitative history of Westerners in the North, northern Indigenous peoples are subject to compounded stresses and social complications (see Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*). Nevertheless, Penikett believes that a new North is being forged as he writes, with many northern artists crossing cultural boundaries and synthesizing art forms (192). Compellingly, he writes:

We are imagining a new north—not just one of snow and cold and remoteness but one with a new consciousness based on community, diversity, equality, flexibility, adaptability, and respect for the land. Our idea of “northernness” is changing. Of course there is still the eternal North: the scent of pine and spruce in the boreal forest, the midnight sun and summer solstice, the sun-dog on a cold winter’s day, the rolling organ pipes of the northern lights, the perfect symmetry of a mountain reflected in the mirror of a northern lake on a windless day, a loon’s call at dusk. (192)

For Penikett, this new North is one being imagined by northern Indigenous peoples with their abiding “consciousness based on community, diversity, equality, flexibility, adaptability, and respect for the land.” Nonetheless, that same territory is often simultaneously a Western landscape open to interpretation. As Barry Lopez writes, the Arctic invites various dreams of desire and imagination (*Arctic Dreams*), depending on one’s worldview.

The elements of those dreams, whether of a frontier to be exploited or a homeland to be dwelt in, reflect the worldview of the dreamer. Essentially, dreams connect the self and place, the inner landscape with the outer landscape. For northern Indigenous peoples, the inner landscape is the outer landscape, and it is imbued with a sense of community and respect for the land.

Place and Stories in the North

Among many Indigenous peoples, place names are more than mere names, they are stories embodied in the land. In her research about Inupiat naming and community history near Shishmaref, Alaska, Susan Fair writes:

Native teachings electrify each named place with an intimate conglomerate of activities, genealogy, history, memory, belief, moral lessons, and future.... Place-names constitute a critically important body of traditional knowledge among Native peoples. Understanding how and why Native places are named, what the places are used for and by whom, and how toponyms are remembered or disappear completely is a complicated endeavor that tells much about Native worldview. (466)

Like Indigenous identities in the North, which must cross cultural boundaries and synthesize art forms, place names have multiple dimensions. Mark Nuttall maintains that for the Eskimos of Northwest Greenland, landscape is also a “memoryscape,” which “is constructed with people’s mental images of the environment, with particular emphasis on places as remembered places” (58).

The new northern tradition harks back readily to the storytelling tradition as embedded in place, an oral tradition that acts as an important social and mythic connection among people of the North. Traditional Indigenous storytelling typically embraces multiple literary genres: song, poetry, drama, narrative, tale. According to Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, northern Indigenous music and poetry should be considered together:

The folk poetry of northern Eurasia contains the same themes, found only among northern peoples. These northern music and poetry relationships and connections have not been sufficiently studied, not been sufficiently compared. Almost by accident, one can note correspondences with the folk legends of the Indians and the Inuit. But even on the basis of the scanty, unsystematic materials before me, I can see the commonalities among the Indians and northern peoples. (“The Sun,” ¶ 13)

Valkeapää goes on to say that northern unities are also evident in both external and internal landscapes, and he identifies strongly with northern peoples throughout the world through their art and rituals. The place of rock carvings, the bear cult, the magic of hunting, the fires of heaven, all are part of these unities. Valkeapää writes:

Petroglyphs are certainly found throughout the world. But I would think it possible to show a special Arctic petroglyph style. With Arctic motifs. Moose and reindeer would be included, often even in x-ray photographs. I would believe that the bear would appear in these drawings. Magic associated with hunting. The stars of the heavens form a moose and a moose-hunter. The moose was an animal of another reality. The fires of heaven—the northern lights, the stars, the moon—live as a rich northern epic. And the bear then, has a special place in the lives of northern peoples. Killing a bear was a lengthy, complex ritual. With many beliefs and legends. (“The Sun,” ¶ 11)

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää feels there are important critical unities among northern cultures, as do I. I believe there are cultural unities implicit in the North, with its unflinching climate and topography, which inevitably condition worldviews. And these unities should be taken into consideration in any literary critique. Indigenous contexts suggest some valuable tools of literary criticism, in a body of work that is growing surprisingly quickly today (e.g., Roche and McHutchinson; McGrath; Allen). Other than Valkeapää himself, I have, however, found no other literary theorists who are suggesting that northern Indigenous literature should be a separate

category of world literature.

All too frequently, constructing a literary identity in the North requires negotiating different identities, a marginalized Indigenous identity and an outside, Western identity. Nevertheless, whether Western or Indigenous, northern tales are deeply rooted in place.

Shamanism and the North

Juha Pentikäinen, the Finnish scholar of the circumpolar shamanic tradition, says that shamanism plays a key role in many northern Indigenous identities. Shamanism as an expression of ethnic religion seems to have a special appeal to the northern peoples today. These religions are undergoing a revival at the moment because they have a lot to do with sharing the feeling of common cultural identity, the northern togetherness of the Fourth World against the pressures coming from the cultures in power, and the attitude of majorities toward minorities (3; see also van Deusen xi-xvi).

Like Pentikäinen, Valkeapää considers shamanism to be syncretically or actually present in northern natural religion:

And this multi-layered ritual world demanded shamans. Shamanism is a phenomenon of northern Eurasia, but the Bering Strait is no barrier to the angakok of the Inuit. Perhaps shamanism is a natural religion. I am not sure what the connection is between the noaidi's drum and that of the Indians, but their function is the same. The music of northern peoples—of the Sámi with their *luohti*-songs and the songs of the Indians are the same, both in form and function. And the sacred *seaidi*-sites are also included in natural religion. Such as a mountain or lake or other holy place. Or a special stone. Or a made object. The Sámi often made fish *seaidi*-sites out of wood. The wooden god of the Evenks of Siberia is just taller. And if red pines, such as those in British Columbia, grew in Sápmi, I think our fish *seaidi*-sites would be the size of totem poles! ("The Sun," ¶ 12)

Across the North, shamanic traditions, with their reliance on tradition, are evident in the landscape for those who are able to read such symbols. Valkeapää, known to his Sámi kin as Áillohaš, has, in effect, adopted the guise of a shaman for the Sámi people and for Indigenous peoples everywhere. As a shaman-poet, he has flown, literally and spiritually, through the worlds that constitute the homelands of people close to their origins. And he has interpreted those worlds in his words and songs and images. What is important here is the use to which Áillohaš, the shaman-poet, has put images of a confiscated drum. As with the photographs that he has repossessed from world archives, he has repossessed Sámi culture, captured it in a new medium, a *govadas*-drum book of his own making. In *Beaivi*, *Áhážan* and *Eanni*, *Eannážan*, Áillohaš has reclaimed the intellectual and cultural property of Sámi peoples and transformed them to his own inten-

tions, by using the very tools Westerners have been developing for years.

The intelligent and beautiful design of these two books, with their juxtaposition of images and texts, with their clear commentary, with the incantatory flow of image and word, image and word, image and word—here we have books that function as shaman drums, and a poet who functions as a shaman in his northern, Indigenous community. By collecting photographs of Indigenous peoples scattered by time and over great distances, he has called forth ideas of community among Indigenous peoples. By centering Beaivi, Áhážan on the poetics of living a reindeer herding lifestyle, he evokes one of the central ways of dwelling that the Sámi and many other northern Indigenous peoples have known. With intelligence and artistry, he summons up shamanic powers to pass through worlds and beyond cultural boundaries. And he does this through his understanding of natural religion, adroitly skirting Western, Judeo-Christian expression by relying deeply on Sámi traditions of craft and life. With his choice of materials, with his arrangement of image and word, and with his strong, gentle voice, Áillohaš has created a cognitive map for the twenty-first century for the Sámi and other Indigenous peoples.

Niegut ja oainahut: Dreams and Prophecies

Dreams, visions, trances, and prophecies all are part and parcel of the shamanic experience, through which shamans pass into other worlds, other places, other times. Throughout Beaivi, Áhážan, the poet charts his dreams and his role as the medicine man for his people.

Early in the cycle, there are hints and intimations about the visionary role the poet is being called to play. In Poem 33, the poet is slowly, almost reluctantly, drawn by his drumming and rock carving into visions:

go lean dearpan bottaža	after	drumming for a while
jámálgan, rohhtásan		I am pulled into another world
oainnuid oaidnit		to visions

The process is slow, physically demanding, like carving rock figures for a ritual or drumming for a trance. But once in the vision, the poet is able to “fly away / see / come back and tell / the people” (“girdilan / oainnán / boadán ja muitalan / olbmui’e,” Poem 42). Having birdlike qualities, “lotti miela” (a “bird mind,” Poem 119) gives the shaman-poet superlative powers of flight and birdlike vision, where he can “look down on the sky ocean” (“vulos almme merrii,” Poem 61), even from a prone position inside a lavvu-tent, where the celestial and maritime dimensions merge and reverse, blurring the boundaries between the real and the natural.

Whether it is the clouds or the bird or the shaman-self that journeys is

hard to say; whether the bird flies in the clouds or the clouds and birds fly in the self is hard to say. As in Poem 67, distance is different, both near and far, both internal and external:

aktonaš loddi,	lone bird,
balvvat	clouds
mun girddan,	I fly,
girdá mus	it flies in me
balvvain	in the clouds
guhkkín, nu lahka	so far away, so close

He seems reluctant to submit to these powers, these visions; the process is so slow (Poem 33) and the people's demands are so forceful ("muhto iežahan jerre," "but they asked for it themselves," Poem 42). What one sees is terrifying and exhilarating and must be told. "The heart hesitates" ("váibmu dállođa," Poem 67) at all that it sees and experiences, the intimations of forced relocations, cultural clashes, cultural struggles:

oarrájit gámis hámit	dark weathered shapes appearing
dálkkiid spiddumat, ehcolaš	whipped by the storm, so intimate
ja bieggá, dát duovdagat	and the wind, these lands
dálkkit, dálvvit	the weather, the winters
giđat, geasit	the springs, the summers
avát	the falls
árvot	imprint
iežaset hámagin	their images (Poem 67)

Despite the horror of the visions, they also contain terrifying beauty.

Being a shaman has always been an outsider role, one that separates a person by his or her powers from the community at large, one with responsibilities and powers that transcend the ordinary. But the process, once started, is both painful and rewarding; it is extraordinary and compelling, taking the shaman to the heavens with the constellations of the ancestors (Poem 68).

The shaman-poet's role is clear; his life task is defined (Poem 115):

bohten fal niegadiet nieguid	I'm here to dream dreams
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The shaman-poet knows that the verities of life are to be found in visions; truth is a dream, and dreams are real. Not only is Beáivi, Áhážan poetry, but it is metaphysics, it is philosophy, it is ethics and aesthetics. We see this in Poem 150 where the poet speculates on the nature of truth, and the shaman-poet demands the truth of dreams, even if only for the present moment:

150. jearahalan duohtavuodá vaikko dieđan duohtanai fal niehku jáhkku dasa ahte jáhkká	150. I always ask for the truth even if I know that truth is a dream a conviction of one's faith
dát niegut ávdnasat eallimii dát niegut lihkká buktán eallima dán rádjái	these dreams convictions for a life these dreams have still brought life along until now

All is transitory; truth, like dreams and the winds, is both permanent and passing. It is the job of the shaman, the task of the poet, to inquire continuously into truth, and dreams are his tools:

duođat duođat dassáži go fas ođđa duohtavuodá niegut	truths truths up until new truths dreams (Poem 150)
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Toward the end of *Beaivi*, Áhážan, the shaman-poet nearly succumbs to the evil wrought upon the Sámi people by the dark visions that he must then relate to his people. Throughout the ages being a shaman has never been easy. Likewise, being a Sámi poet is demanding and life-threatening, as we are shown in Poem 464, where he “wrestled the darkest visions / was overpowered by sorcery” (“juodđohin seavdnjadeamos oainnuid / ihtohallen”). Nevertheless, the shaman-poet persists in his chosen task. At the end of the volume, where the poet considers the nature of life and being, he once again invites his dreams and visionary journeys (Poem 539). Áillohaš is his dreams, and he lingers meditatively and metaphysically over the realities of his own life in the long, eight-page, Poem 558. In effect, Poem 558 is Áillohaš’s shamanic creed, his statement of beliefs and experience. He writes, somewhat sadly, about concluding his life cycle, his poet’s cycle, his shaman’s dream:

mu govadas devdon, mun, adjágasniehku, niehku niegus my vessel is filled, I, this semi dream, dream within dream rabestan uvssa olggos go sisa lávken I open the door outward when I enter mii lean go gullán, makkár what am I when I awake, what gii oaidná dáid nieguid who can see these dreams

Conclusion

In the Western tradition, it is respected literary practice to distinguish between the speaker of a poem and the poet. This dichotomy goes to the heart of Western ontology. However, as Valkeapää himself says, he is in his poems (Landon 142) and, at the risk of blurring the life of the poet with the story in *Beaivi, Áhážan*, I dare say that we can know the poet clearly in these poems, which are the stories of his shamanic experiences. Dreams are truth, and the poems are the tellings of the dreams.

While this single analysis of a Sámi poet's work does not conclusively prove there are universals throughout northern literature, nevertheless, it does chart themes and motifs in one northern Indigenous poet's work that can be found rather readily in other northern literature. The relationship of the self to place is of critical importance, and the tools at hand for the poet and the shaman are similar. The role of the poet and the role of the shaman within northern communities are ones of sustaining and transmitting culture, even if at tremendous personal cost.

About the Author

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