

Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore and Stefan Donecker (eds.), *Imagining the Supernatural North* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016)

*Imagining the Supernatural North* is a collection of sixteen essays written by scholars from various fields of study, who have investigated, from multiple perspectives, the theme of the North as part of the collective imagination throughout history, while focusing on the kindred connection between Northerness and the supernatural.

It is my belief that because of the subject at hand and the specific expertise of the authors involved, this book encourages the reader to reflect on one, or rather, two highly topical areas of study, which are strictly related to one another. The first area concerns cultural and imaginative geography, the attention paid to spaces and places in which the meetings of cultures and cultural phenomena occur, and to the multifarious area of maps and mappings, both geographic and mental. The second area is concerned with real and imaginary encounters with the 'other' and the 'others' as well as the complexity underlying the construction of otherness with its ensuing ambivalences.

To Europeans, the North is the exotic space of otherness, where dreams and fears can be relegated, and which is the perfect space where the supernatural dimension can be freed and nurtured inasmuch as it is alien to 'western' civilisation and rationality. However, the book's standpoint is not merely Eurocentric. In fact, it is quite interesting to discover that the very Nordic peoples have their own northern 'peripheries' or, in other words, their 'other' places, which are designated for the dissemination of the magical, the monstrous and the diabolical.

This collection of essays maps out a journey around the theme of the *Supernatural North* through a cross-disciplinary approach encompassing the history of religions, mythology, historiography, anthropology, philosophy, geography as well as music and literary theory and criticism. This journey is built diachronically and attempts to outline the transhistorical trajectory of a theme through a narrative, following the variations of the image and concept of the *Supernatural North* from classical antiquity to very recent contemporary cultural phenomena.

The four parts the book is divided into mirror the evolution and the development of this central idea and are titled, respectively, "Ancient Roots. The Menace and the Divine", "From the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period. The Monstrous and the Demonic", "The Nineteenth Century. The Scientific and the Spiritual" and "Contemporary Perspectives. The Desire of a Supernatural North".

In the first part, the reader is confronted with the multifaceted ambiguity of the image of the North developed within Jewish (Ya'acov Sarig) and Greek (Maria Kasyanova e Athanasios Votsis) cultures: ancient Jewish rituals and legends seem to identify the origin of

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every evil with the North, although this image leads to more positive characterisations over time. On the other hand, in Greek culture, the ambiguity inherent in the figure of Boreas, the god of the North wind, is compounded by the virtuous yet mysterious myth of the Hyperboreans, creatures halfway between the gods and the human race.

This semantic duplicity seems to take a darker and more monstrous turn in medieval times, which the second part of the volume is dedicated to. This part of the book, besides following the diachronic transmission of the more fascinating “*Monstra Septentrionalia*”, from Adam of Bremen to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century maps still teeming with them (Rudolf Simek), delves into the relationship between witchcraft and the North, including those elements of Aristotelian natural philosophy, medicine and theology which form its theoretical basis (Brenda S. Gardenour Walter). Additionally, this section introduces the reader to the manner in which certain specific literary sources make up the North’s supernatural otherness. On the one hand, it illustrates how Icelandic sagas portray Greenland as a place filled with monstrous ‘Wilderness’ (Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough), while on the other hand, the reader is introduced to the context and the strategy through which *Somnium* (1634), a peculiar posthumous work by Johannes Kepler, creates a magical Iceland and encapsulates the North in the early modern age, while using Olaus Magnus’s *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* as its primary source (Stefan Donecker).

The third part of the volume is centred on a dual encounter with the North: one that is a concrete and first-hand account of Arctic explorations and one that is romantic and which, by rediscovering northern cultures, reintroduces the image of a magical and mysterious North: the age-old fears arising from northern monstrosities now take on a lasting and darkly alluring aura. Both aspects (explorations and romantic ideas) are intertwined: romantic travellers, for example, seek the spirit of the songs of Ossian in real-world Scotland (Angela Byrne), while in 1845 the Austrian traveller Ida Pfeiffer explores Iceland as she deconstructs the romantic expectations she had set out with. (Jennifer E. Michaels).

In their travel books and books of legends (written between 1875 and 1921), the two anthropologists and explorers Knud Rasmussen and Hinrich Rink give an account of a magical and monstrous Greenland, in particular its desolate interior, thus meeting the general public’s ‘romantic’ expectation, which had by now been established, while also becoming an integral part of that tradition which can be recognized as Northerness (Silvije Habulinec). One last connection between Arctic travels and the supernatural may be identified in the mesmeric practices used for contacting lost explorers: even the voices of the clairvoyants seem to convey an image of the North which encapsulates all the knowledge and the tales, spun over time, surrounding the kingdom of ice (Shane Mccorristine).

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The last part of the book explores the importance of the image of the supernatural North in a variety of current discourses between literature, the academic world and subcultures, such as heavy-metal music and the world of "Otherkin". In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov describes a world that is alien, remote and northern, a longed-for place, a lost homeland that can preserve the freedom of the imagination while asserting victory over reality (Brian Walter), whereas Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* creates a northern world which, by drawing on the traditional and romantic topoi of the Supernatural North, is rendered deliberately realistic and concrete in an attempt to communicate its environmental, anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist message more vehemently (Danielle Marie Cudmore). Again, it is the romantic legacy, sifted through the countless literary and filmic revisitations, which breathes new life into some subcultures that are particularly related to the supernatural north. In fact, black metal, pagan metal and newfolk music are all infused with the north and its myths in every respect, be it aesthetic, acoustic, performative and even linguistic and stylistic, often based on an idea of obscurity and irrationality, which sometimes take on martial and anti-Christian overtones (Jan Leichsenring). Conversely, the relationship that Otherkin has with its Nordic and mythological source seems to be more existential and philosophical, in that the individuals of these predominantly virtual communities feel the need to incorporate non-human (i.e., animal or supernatural) elements into their identity. Influenced directly by the Nordic myths and folklore, these communities prompt a philosophical reflection on the modern individual by also relying on such contemporary practices as New Age and New Shamanism (Jay Johnston). The last essay aims to reshape the romantic and exotic idea of the shaman rooted in the academic world by means of anthropological tools. In fact, the relationship with the supernatural is a practice men and women from various Arctic peoples engage in on a daily basis (Erica Hill).

In summary, this brief overview of the wealth of information, expertise and thought-provoking suggestions contained in this book cannot do full justice to its alluring potential as a research instrument. While on the one hand the scientific approach and language make for a delightfully riveting read, on the other hand, the trans-historic perspective helps the reader identify a number of threads which crisscross the whole volume and which call for further investigation (e.g., the relationship between the geographical landscape and the collective consciousness; the North from an eco-critical perspective; the role of the feminine in the supernatural construction of the North and so forth). I am sure this line of research still has a lot to reveal, partly and precisely because of this invaluable contribution.

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