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**'NORTHERN CULTURES'
WHAT COULD THIS MEAN?
About the North as a Cultural Concept**

Under this heading, I will speculate on a number of issues relating to the sphere of action of this conference - cultures around the Baltic as Northern cultures - and on the question of cultural studies in general. At the same time, my choice of methodology and examples will rely much on the Russian sphere of culture. However, I intend to present the outline of a general framework for culturological research which would allow the comparative study of the concepts of north (and south, for that matter) in the cultures involved.

The general question of culture is so broad that it may seem hopeless to address it in global terms. At the same time, however, one may expect, and for the same reason, a considerable degree of intellectual consensus as to what is covered by the concept.

A more specific question, one related to the adjective 'Northern', is considerably more controversial. It suggests a geographical basis of cultural identity which may not immediately appear to be motivated in a natural and convincing way. And the use of the plural, 'Northern cultures', only complicates matters, because it suggests a typological as well as topological basis for the description and comparison of cultures in a particular region of the world. It also suggests the possibilities of southern, western, and eastern cultures, and indeed, such polarities should also be considered. As with many general concepts related to 'culture', these, too, will more or less be taken for granted in common parlance. This means that we have at least some implicit, mental images of the nations in a particular area of the world, of their cultures, and of their historic connections and mutual influences. But as soon as we try to define the exact nature of these common elements, we invariably hit upon differences between them which appear no less essential than the features they are supposed to share.

Territorial and geopolitical arguments are, of course, not the only ones involved here, but they invariably form the foundation for such concepts.

Nevertheless, the simple assumption of 'affinity' between cultures around the Baltic sea, or, for that matter, around the Mediterranean, may be acceptable on a certain level of comparison, but will be too simplistic or indiscriminate from another point of view. So, for example, the Russians and the Swedes undeniably share a common sea, and they have been major historic actors in that area for a long time in history, as were the Greeks and Romans around the Mediterranean;¹ and the history of the Hanseatic league is proof of the fact that different peoples in North-Western Europe and around the Baltic Sea during a particular period of history found a common economic principle which, moreover, has left enduring imprints in their languages, architecture, and urban culture.

The idea of associating different peoples on the basis of common features is of course far from new: it has always been done on ethnic, linguistic, or religious grounds. This is fair enough for certain groups of peoples, or nations around the Baltic, like the Balts themselves, the Finns and Estonians, the Scandinavians, or the Slavs. Still, even among these groups there are considerable differences, as for example between the Poles and the Russians.

But when it comes to comparisons between such groups in the same area, there are problems. With respect to the Swedes and the Russians, it seems easier to draw up a list of differences than a list of common features. Their respective histories, politically, socially, and mentally, have yielded the most striking polarities, resulting in contrastive, commonplace conceptions about the nature of these peoples, clichés which we tend to apply to entire nations and cultures.

For example, on the one hand, we have Sweden, with its specific, steady (and even exemplary) evolution towards parliamentary democracy, its famous "Middle Way" attitudes in dealing with socio-economic tensions, labour conflicts, industrial developments and state interventionism, in handling social inequities, and with its personality 'habitus' of balanced but rather distanced individualism.

And on the other hand, there is Russia, with its tradition of repetitive

¹G. S. Lebedev takes the Mediterranean - Baltic parallel as the typological basis for a culturological and historical comparison of Rome and Saint-Petersburg (Lebedev 1993, 47 - 63).

despotism and passive collectivity, its history of socio-political stagnation alternating with intense upheaval and revolution, with a capacity for senseless cruelty next to a talent for the most intense demonstrations of affection and frenzied utopianism, in short the contours of what is often labelled as "Russian maximalism".

Nevertheless, in both cultures, however different from each other, there is undeniably a Northern characteristic, and, even more important, in both cultures also a collective consciousness of this characteristic has developed. This means that the concept of 'Northernness' has somehow become internalized in their cultural identity and mentality. Our problem is how to describe this process.

On this level, we would need a typology of a different nature. If there appear to be no obvious inherent features for the foundation of a cultural concept of 'Northernness', should we not then step first to the study of outward, circumstantial factors? This has been done before.

In part three of book 14 of his famous *De l'esprit des lois* (first published 1748) Montesquieu supposes that there exists a natural and causal relation between the properties of different climates and the differences in temperament and spirit of the peoples living in different climates; cf. his opening statement, his *idée générale* (Montesquieu 1951, Chapter 1):

S'il est vrai que le caractère de l'esprit et les passions du cœur soient extrêmement différents dans les divers climats, les lois doivent être relatives et à la différence de ces passions, et à la différence de ces caractères.

He even goes so far as to make the climate responsible for a totally different physical and physiological make-up of man, depending on whether he lives in a warm, southern, or in a cold, Northern climate. Warm air relaxes and extends the "fibres" of our body, and thereby weakens them, whereas cold air contracts them and thus makes them stronger, and it also forces the heart to exert more power. The cold climates make for strong hearts, courageous, confident characters, frank and with little thirst for revenge, or suspicion. But, says Montesquieu, put a man in a "warm and closed place" ("dans un lieu chaud et enfermé"), and he will suffer considerable "cardiac weakness" ("défaillance de cœur").

It is all a matter of degree. In cold countries people will have little sensibility for 'pleasure' ("pour les plaisirs"); this sensibility will be greater in temperate climates, and extreme in warm climates. Climates are distinguished by degrees of geographical latitude, but one could equally distinguish between them by degrees of sensibility, and here Montesquieu tells us about his observations as to how differently an English and an Italian audience reacted to the same opera. The same holds for the sensation of pain, according to Montesquieu, and this inspired him to his probably most memorable, if exotic, dictum about the Russians as a Northern people: "one has to skin a Muscovite in order to make him feel anything ("Il faut écorcher un Moscovite pour lui donner du sentiment")".

Montesquieu's ideas, however popular and intellectually adequate in his age, are nowadays, of course, still great fun to read, but unacceptable for obvious and fundamental scientific reasons (even for one who is not a biologist, or physiologist this is clear). Nevertheless, from a historical, culturological point of view, it is worth noticing, for instance, how Montesquieu was clearly biased in his evaluation in favour of Northernness; this tells us more about the man than about the phenomena he *thought* he observed and tried to explain. His pseudoscientific physiological dogma lead him to postulate and construct 'insensibility' as a necessary, and therefore typical trait of the Muscovite. But, of course, 'insensibility', just like 'sensibility', for that matter, are not simple and evident concepts which, moreover, could be isolated from a specific context and treated as absolutes.

We may laugh at his train of thought; nevertheless, I think most of us would be willing - and would indeed go a long way - to accept as real and evident the very differences in the reactions between the English and the Italian opera audiences in Montesquieu's example. In his example he opposed manifestations of temperaments that we feel are typical of 'the Italians', as against 'the English' (these are the obvious clichés; cf. Montesquieu on these reactions: "mais la même musique produit des effets si différents sur les deux nations, l'une est si calme, et l'autre si transportée, que cela paroît inconcevable").

Instead of taking human physiology and biology 'simply' as a basis for cultural typology, it would seem more promising to look for common behavioral characteristics, which are *conventional*, and *coded*, as far as they are connected with the pragmatics of language, including gestures,

and ritualized patterns in communicative behaviour (for example: trying to speak Italian with a stiff upperlip?). This would, evidently, involve a joint and interdisciplinary effort of, at least, (socio-)linguists and psychologists².

I think we now reach an important stage in the development of a theoretical framework for the typological and comparative description of cultures. What I mean is the fact that we have to realize that Montesquieu imposed 'natural law', in the sense of 'the laws of nature', and its causalities on the realm of cultural phenomena. However, culture as such, and all that pertains to it, is not subject to the laws of nature, to the necessities and relations defined by physics. Its fundamentally different ontological status is, I think, adequately indicated by Jurij Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere* (as against the *biosphere*), i.e. the entire sphere of activities of man as a 'signmaker', as a creator and user of signs and signification (cf. Lotman 1990, Part two). This means that we are dealing with facts of a different nature.

Of course there *is* a material basis of culture, and a very important one, at that, including the facts of technology and economy, and also those very same facts of geographical neighbourhood and climate on which Montesquieu based his anthropological views. This is culture in the sense of the history of people's interactions with the material world they live in, the history of their adaptations to life in woods, or to life on treeless plains, or near a sea, of becoming nomads, hunters, fishers, or farmers, and so forth. The material and natural world is thereby drawn into the process of signification, such as religion, myth making, rites, decorating tools, folkloristic ornamentation, etc. This also means the attribution of meanings and values to the immutable parts and features of the world, such as the facts of geography, the forces of nature, climate, and, indeed, 'the four winds': North - South, East - West. These meanings no doubt present themselves as very basic and even archaic. But it would be a mistake to think that they would not be active any more in contemporary culture.

This is also where a great variety of fields of study become necessary for

²For an interesting recent assessment of such questions, see the review by K. Anthony Appiah of Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View*, in NYR XLII:1, pp. 29-33.

possible angles of analysis and description, including political science, economy and sociology, the comparative study of folklore, mythology and religion, ethnolinguistics, art history, and literature.³ What these disciplines have in common is that they study the actual informational content (material and formal) of human culture and its values. A plausible useful term to identify a particular complex of such collective concepts could be *mentality*.

'Mentality' is probably hard to define in a strictly scientific way, but it is nevertheless a current term used to grasp the common character, the 'Gestalt', of a group of people. There will no doubt be psychologists or sociologists who will hesitate, or even refuse outright, to accept it as a technical term. But, in my opinion, the student of ethnolinguistics, of folklore, of mythology and literature as the vehicles of cultural concepts and attitudes should not necessarily be afraid of it. Structuralism and semiotics study language in its diverse functionalities and idioms as the codification, as the channel of transmission, of often implicit, collective concepts (mentalities). This means that communities using their particular languages thereby automatically (i.e. irrespective of individual choice), express particular opinions, attitudes, and images of the world, as these are coded by idioms, sayings, and proverbs.

A phenomenological and semiotic approach to the mentality question,

³An interesting illustration of these ideas is furthermore to be found in an article by Anthony Grafton ('Ah, Wilderness') in the *New Yorker Review of Books* Vol.XLI, No 17 (Oct.20) 1994, pp. 44-49. In this review of Christopher S. Wood's book *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* Grafton writes about the "invention of the landscape" (Wood) in German, i.e. northern, renaissance painting. Grafton stresses the importance of the period around 1500 in the development of German cultural identity as northern. Starting point was Tacitus' flattering picture of "virtuous, hard-living ancient Germans, whom [he] contrasted with the Romans, fatally corrupted by the terrors and temptations of life in the new imperial system (...). [German Humanists] also trawled the written sources for medieval German history, conjuring up, not for the last time, a noble, northern past (...)" (p.46). Grafton, furthermore, discusses the essential, ideological meaning of woods and landscapes as an image, however ambiguous, for the scholars, as well as the artists, in those days: "They stood for the forest virtues of the ancient Germans, for national identity" (p.48).

in my opinion, offers a solution for the impasse, the dilemma concerning 'material facts' and 'concepts about these facts'. Mentality would then be defined not as a set of objective phenomena, but rather as their semiotic representations; in other words not as a matter of facts, but as a matter of perceptions and representations.

Nowadays 'culture' usually is conceived so broadly as to comprise any form of significant human behaviour in its historical development, covering the more traditional, narrower concept of 'civilization', including arts and sciences, religion, politics, as well as social behaviour, morals, fashion, and also their material reflections. Lotman and Uspenskij (1984, 3) once defined culture as follows: "In the widest sense of the word, culture may be understood as non-hereditary collective memory expressed in a definite system of prescriptions and prohibitions". Their definition thus highlights the moral, ideological (axiological) component in any culture. They also stress that the position of the investigator of a culture is an external position; the object of investigation is the position of the internal observer and 'bearer' of a particular culture. In other words, what is studied is the image of the self, the own-culture, as against the perception of other cultures. Thus, one can study mentality as a national phenomenon, as a set of features shared by a group of people, and recognized as such by themselves, or as perceived and recognized by others. By neighbours, for instance. This brings us back, for a while, to geography.

The question of Northern cultures is, of course, also a question of material, geographical neighbourhood. For the nations around the Baltic, the fact of their living in that area throughout history has determined their mutual relations, as well as their relations with the rest of Europe. Their peripheral position in relation to the main body of European cultures was the cause of a certain independence, but it also tended to isolate them. In his study of the social and economic history of the Scandinavian countries, Gunnar Heckscher (1984, 20), for example, points to an important fact in this connection; talking about the differences between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe he says the following:

Nordic development differed from that of other Western European countries in other respects as well. Partly because the Roman legions never reached Scandinavia and partly for other reasons,

above all the fact that Scandinavia was located far from the centre of Europe, there was practically no reception of Roman law in Sweden and not very much in Denmark either. (...). Moreover, even in the Middle Ages, the Church of Rome had never succeeded or bothered to establish the same kind of authority in these distant Northern countries as, for instance, in Germany.

This brings Heckscher to the conclusion, furthermore, that "Nordic society, if not the Nordic governments, displayed extremely strong continuity" (idem, 21). Neither the Slavs, who were not yet in place at the time, nor the Balts, ever received Roman legions, or directly Roman law. But for them it worked out quite differently, and with little stability. The pagan Lithuanians for a long time during the Middle Ages resisted Teutonic pressure, and thereby also resisted the adoption of Christianity, which in fact did not take place before the end of the 14th century. Once it had become a Christian country, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, before it merged with Poland, for some time developed a tremendous political and military power, acting as a buffer between Catholic Europe and the East, and was Muscovy's deadly enemy.

Because of the geographical and geopolitical situation, the Baltic throughout history has caused confrontations and interactions between Eastern and Western culture. Here a global, but fascinating, parallel with the Mediterranean (and perhaps with the Pontic as well) situation would seem worthy of further research.

In the course of history, the majority of cultures around the Baltic joined what one could call the continental cultural 'European community'. They too, went through the process of acquiring European identity as Catholics or Lutherans. Otherwise, indeed, they remained Orthodox.

Continental Europe acted as a medium for the transmission of a Mediterranean, mostly Roman, cultural heritage. And here we can observe the 'rift' between the West, or simply 'Europe', developing its specific cultural and national diversification, - and the East, or Muscovy, with its centralist identification as the "Third Rome", which lasted until Peter the Great unleashed his cultural revolution, and opened his famous "Window on the West".

Apart from this general, converging pattern, for our purpose it may, however, be interesting to focus on certain autonomous tendencies in the

(early period of) cultural developments along the east coast of the Baltic.

Interactions between different peoples, nations, or ethnic groups can result in common levels of cultural identification, and in various forms of convergence in the linguistic sense. And if not a common language in the literal sense is the result, then various other, parallel phenomena of common culture can develop in zones of contact where different ethnic groups are confronted with each other during a stretch of time, and where they have some common interest, be it trade, war, or religion. And the latter appears to be of particular significance, for example, in the early contacts between the Finns and the Eastern Slavs.

Joint research in archaeology, history, philology and linguistics of the Baltic countries and Northern Russia, the Ladoga-Novgorod area in particular, has yielded the commonly accepted concept of the Finno-Slavic *symbiosis*. This concept relates to extensive ethno-cultural relations in the 9th and 10th centuries between the Finnish and Estonian tribes in that area, and the only 'recently' arrived Eastern Slavs, or Russians. It was established that the Finns and Estonians, and the early Russians, even after the latter were converted to Christianity, made use of each others' soothsayers and shamans, as well as sanctuaries. Recurrent motifs from this common cultural heritage can be found in chronicles, legends, and other texts about shamanistic rituals of Finno-ugric origin. But, as, for example, Dmitrij Spivak stresses in a recent article (1993, referring also to A. N. Kirpichnikov, and E. A. Rjabinin), the Finno-ugric cultural substratum continues to be active (or to be reactivated) in the subsequent Russian history of that area, and can even be traced in the particular legends and mythology (and even 'metaphysics') surrounding the creation of Saint-Petersburg in 'the Finnish bogs' (as the poets have it) in the early 18th century.

At this level, Slavs and Finns in their past can be said to share specific cultural elements which we can identify and label as actually 'Northern' for a number of material, semantic, and semiotic reasons: by virtue of the geographical area, by virtue of archaeological and philological data (artifacts, birchbark texts, manuscripts), and also on the basis of the specific Finno-ugric pagan content of the shared cultural elements (featuring e. g. a monsterlike god living in the sea and demanding sacrifices). The Northern Russians who adopted these rituals thereby began to differ from

their brethren in the south (this can be philologically attested; cf. Spivak on lexical differences in Old Russian chronicles). A comparable phenomenon is the history of the Scandinavian Varangians and the Russians.

This is also where the ethnographical, 'material' basis seems to end, so to say. But, of course, this does not nearly exhaust the full range of possible representations of such cultural concepts and the values ascribed to them.

The next step would be to the purely semiotic level. The opposition North-South can be studied as a question of semiotic modelling through its representations in language, in mythology, and in the arts. In the history of art we are confronted with traditions and continuities of a special nature, which differ fundamentally from those of language, or law, for example. Besides its traditions, art simultaneously shows autonomous behaviour and mechanisms of development in which *choice* plays an essential role. Individual artists will, within the range of a certain tradition or period style, make distinct choices of their own regarding dominant thematics and stylistic solutions. I would like to stress these two facts: that of the individual choice of the artist, and at the same time the fact that in his freedom of choice and combination he is inevitably confronted with certain cultural traditions of motifs, genres, and styles, i. e. premodelled, given means of expression.

I would like to illustrate my point with a brief excursion into the major historic developments of the theme of the north in Russian literature (cf. van Baak 1988; Boele 1994). At the same time, I am convinced that comparable research for other literatures in the area would be equally worth pursuing. I would like to start with two global conclusions:

1. In the relevant literature, 'North' can be explicitly *opposed* to 'South', but this is not always the case; in other words, the North, and the thematics that have become associated with it, can be literarily effective without its opposite being mentioned.

2. Not all literary periods (authors) value this concept in the same degree. Moreover, the differences in importance of the Northern theme and its treatment between various periods are not a question of mere chance or accident. These differences are symptomatic of the artistic characteristics (ideology and aesthetics) of the period styles.

We should start in the 18th century. Among French thinkers and authors of the Enlightenment there developed a 'myth' of the enlightened North under the rule of Empress Catherine the Great. On the occasion of her accession to the throne, Voltaire said that from that moment the sun of Enlightenment would shine from the North. By saying that he, of course, rephrased the fashionable, 18th century myth of progress under enlightened despotism. But the image also reveals important aspects of the symbolic and ideological potential of the North that would play a role in the development of Russian letters, of intellectual and political thought for many generations of Russians. In the context of Russian culture of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the ideal of the enlightened Northern capital of Saint Petersburg would blend with the myth of the battle between Light and Darkness. Because the political and cultural centre of gravity of Russia after the beginning the 18th century shifts to the North (West) corner of the empire, it is not amazing that the Northern character of Peter's city acquires a broad and complex symbolical significance for Russian culture in general, and that the South becomes peripheral. Images containing symbolic reference to light and the North not only yielded a powerful paradox, but would also easily develop positive intellectual and cultural connotations, as, for example, in the so-called "Northern Society" of the Decembrist uprising, in the name of their journal, *The Polar Star*, appearing again in the almanac of that name edited by the emigrants Herzen and Ogarev in London between 1855 and 1868 (bearing the significant motto by Pushkin, "Long live reason"). Other examples are the names of literary journals and almanacs of the sentimentalist and romantic decades, like *The Northern Bee*, *Northern Flowers*, *The Northern Singer*. Also during this period there is a Russian reception of Nordic mythology and of myths related to the North: Germanic and Scandinavian mythology (although mostly in utterly distorted versions), the *Kalevala*, and the inescapable Ossian. In this phase of Russian cultural reception, 'North' equals 'West'. An interesting example is the story named 'The Island Bornholm' (1794) by the Russian sentimentalist, Nikolaj Karamzin (1787-1855). It is an early romantic story with gothic clichés and references to a distant Baltic past which included both Slavs and Scandinavians. At the same time the author sets a fashion of singing the praise of Northern nature as a masterpiece of creation. After the Russo-Swedish war of

1808-1809 Finland became part of the Russian empire. As a result we have, among other things, the prose work called "A Picture of Finland. From a Russian Officer's Letters about Finland" (1809) by the poet Konstantin Batjushkov, who served in the Russian army. The combination (nobleman-) officer-poet in those days was indeed almost rule, rather than exception. It was also responsible for the fact that the Caucasus is such a prominent locus in the literature of Russian romanticism. The southward expansion and consolidation of the Russian empire during the 18th and 19th centuries required a tremendous military effort. And the wild nature of the Caucasus, with its exotic, freedom-loving mountaineers, could not but impress and inspire generations of young, poetically inclined officers in the Russian occupying force. But then, Finland's horizontal, Northern nature is a far cry from the exuberance of the warm, colourful Caucasian mountains. Batjushkov is clearly apologetic about the poetic qualities of Northern nature. He speaks about the "poor and gloomy", but "charmingly wild" Finnish nature. Nature may be harsh there, but it makes for brave, strong, and imaginative characters, civilized by a rich poetic tradition of songs and sagas.

The spiritual vision of nature in the European romantic tradition also stands out prominently in the way Northern nature is treated in Russian romantic literature. Heinrich Heine's influence on the Russian romanticists is remarkable with respect to Northern thematics. His famous poem, "Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam / Im Norden auf kahler Höh", is supposed to be the first of his works to be translated into Russian; moreover, it was translated at least 5 times by different Russian poets during the 19th century.

The North in Russian literary and cultural consciousness of the early 19th century has not only abstract philosophical and symbolical significance. In the works of Pushkin (1799-1837), Lermontov (1814-1841), and others, concrete motifs connected with the Northern climate for the first time become important as poetic expressions of national cultural identity: winter, ice, snow, frost, etc. Snowstorms, for example, are exploited in literary plots, and one of Pushkin's finest poems evokes the vital joy of awakening on a sunny, frosty winter morning, with the perspective of a trojka drive at breakneck speed through fresh snow.

The Russian winter theme acquires a strong political and ideological connotation in connection with the Napoleonic war (cf. Boele 1994 on this

theme). According to the popular Russian vision, the military ruin of the French was caused by the Russian winter. The winter had been the ally of the Russians in their battle against Napoleon, in whom they recognized the appearance of the Antichrist. The victory over Napoleon immensely boosted Russian national consciousness. France, a southern country, became discredited as the only source of genuine civilization. Once more we meet the idea of the physical and moral superiority of a nation living in the North. Only now, this feeling is 'generated', so to say, by the Russians themselves, and somewhat later it becomes part of (or: internalized in) Slavophile thinking about Russia's special place in history.

We have seen how positive connotations came to be connected with the North in Russian literature and culture. Following Boele's suggestion (Boele 1994), we could call this process the 'domestication of the winter', representing a stage in the Russian cultural internalization of the north. However, at the same time there has always been a demonic side to the North in Russian cultural perception as well. To a great extent this is tied up with the image of Saint Petersburg as a demonic, and even devilish, rationalist's construction. Indeed, a negative mythology has surrounded the city ever since it was founded. We find it exploited in Pushkin's poem 'The Bronze Horseman', for example, and, of course, in Gogol's (1809-1852) *Petersburg Tales*. This demonic aspect of the North, and particularly in connection with Petersburg, will appear again with a remarkable intensity at the onset of Russian Modernism (the 1890's, through 1920's); I shall come back to this later.

As I said before, not all literary periods, or authors, value this concept in the same degree. Moreover, the differences in importance of the Northern theme and its treatment in various periods are not a question of mere chance or accident, but are symptomatic of the artistic characteristics of the period styles. This is in agreement with the fact that in other respects too, romanticism and symbolism, or modernism in a broader sense have much in common in the way they construct literary worlds. As such they are typologically opposed to the realist 'mode'.

Russian Realism dominates the literary scene roughly speaking from the 1840's until the 1890's. This stylistic domination entailed some important shifts in the way the world is (re)presented, and in the choice of the preferred settings. Russian realism in general turned towards the rural rather than the urban world, and it was interested in central Russia rather

than the periphery (Caucasus, Siberia, the North). In the realistic world picture North and South is primarily a matter of geography, and there is no place for a North or a South with strong mythical and symbolic connotations, as in the romanticist's view.

Around 1900, Modernism, or the 'Silver Age', as it is also called, marks a new development in Russian culture witnessing an impressive revival of Northern thematics. In Russian Modernism we can distinguish at least two major, successive phases: Symbolism (roughly between 1890 and the First World War), and the so called (Historical) Avantgarde (beginning just before 1914, and ending with the onset of Stalinism at the beginning of the 1930's). However different in many respects, these two phases share at least the following features: a radical break with the aesthetics and attitudes of realism and the outlook of the 19th century in general, a sense of catastrophe, and, indeed, among other things, a renewed significance of the North as a cultural concept and symbol. Around the turn of the century, Scandinavian culture enjoyed a great authority in Russia. Nordic and Germanic mythology exerted a strong influence on the imagination of many symbolist poets, and contemporary Scandinavian culture became also very popular (e.g. Ibsen, Strindberg, Grieg). Of great importance in this process was the Russian artists' colony which developed in Kuokkala on the so-called "Karelian Riviera" (on the myth of the North in Russian Modernism cf. particularly Nilsson 1987). Two of the leading Symbolists, Brjusov (1873-1924) and Bal'mont (1867-1943), were admirers of Scandinavian nature and Scandinavian cultural history. Bal'mont, for example, was enthusiastic about the Nordic world, the Scandinavia of the Vikings, which he claimed as his own fatherland, as well. He stressed that Russia too, was a Nordic country in her own right. In symbolist poetry of around 1900, there was a revival of the nostalgia for 'Nordic' qualities like courage, manliness, etc., which were considered to be genuine Russian qualities as well (Nilsson 1987, 128). Out of many possible examples here, I want to mention only one more author, Andrej Belyj (1880-1934). He experimented with rhythmical prose in his so called 'symphonies'; his first 'symphony' was called also the 'Nordic' or 'Heroic' symphony, allegedly written under the influence of Grieg's music, and treating the well known battle between light and darkness. Symbolists like Aleksandr Blok and Andrej Belyj show a marked tendency to develop the demonic side of the North. Belyj's fame moreover rests most of all on his truly epochal and

innovating novel *Petersburg* (first edition in 1913), in which he merges the traditional Petersburg mythology (going back to Pushkin, Gogol', and Dostoevskij in particular), and the modernist, pre-revolutionary sense of catastrophe.

The Avantgarde in many respects is a continuation of the stylistic revolution begun by Belyj in particular. However, a crucial difference is the fact that by now the real catastrophe had taken place: the first World War, the revolutions of 1917, and the Civil War. In the experimental prose of the 1920's, the periphery becomes prominent again, particularly in evocations of the horrors of the civil war in Siberia. Among the authors of this period there is one who deserves special attention because of the role of the North in his work, Jevgenij Zamjatin (1884-1937) (cf. van Baak 1988, 34-42). A number of his stories are set around the White Sea, but much of his other work equally manifests an elaborate network of images and symbols of the north. Zamjatin symbolically exploits the thematics of the North, the Arctic, the cold, and, again, the battle between Light and Darkness in a tragic modernist vision of human nature and 20th century catastrophic culture.

In the 1930's, in the period often referred to as 'High Stalinist Culture' (Clark 1985, Ch. 2), the conquest of nature by the new man was a major theme of the Socialist realist artistic program. The successful completion of impossible rescue operations, long distance flights, and expeditions under the worst of conditions are clearly cases in which Northern nature is more than a geographical reality of the Soviet Union; it has an ideological function in presenting a challenge to the socialist hero. Throughout the Soviet period the merging of official ideology and national identity inevitably entailed an ideological modelling of the fatherland, including the 'harsher' parts of it. Although detailed research is necessary here, one can expect that, in that sense, the concept of 'Northernness' as a mentality and complex of values is active in many texts *in abstracto*, so to say, i.e. without the North as such being mentioned or even symbolically involved.

Without elaborating on it, I want to mention the very special meaning in 20th century Russia of the GULAG world. Officially denied existence for a long time, it was a reality as close to Hell as man can imagine, and, of course, a demonic Northern (Siberian) world, especially in the work of authors like Solzhenitsyn (b.1918) and Shalamov (1907-1982). This particular literary and historical context of Northernness as a concept in

Russian cultural history deserves a detailed description on its own.

Recent developments present a complicated picture, which also still awaits its due attention. For all I know, recent Russian literature does not seem to lend special symbolic or ideological significance to the concept of Northernness. But there are some remarkable exceptions. To one of those exceptions I shall devote special attention. Otherwise, mention should be made of the, so-called 'village-writers' (like, for example, Rasputin (b.1937), Astafjev (b.1924), Belov (b.1932)). They are mostly traditionalists (if not reactionary utopianists in some cases) who typically revert to idealizing or reconstructing a pristine rural Russian, and Siberian, world before the collectivization and industrialization under the Soviets. It would not be difficult to identify the virtues of their Russian rural worlds as actually 'Northern' in a typological cultural sense. Nothing really new here, however.

This overview was devoted to Russian letters, but I am convinced that an analysis along these lines could yield interesting results for other literatures around the Baltic as well, with different points of view, different mentalities and images of the own culture, and of that of the neighbours.

By studying the literary inventory of Northern thematics, we should be able to describe the cultural significance of 'Northernness' for a particular author, for groups of authors, and also for a national literature as a whole. We can study the way in which material data, trivial facts, clichés and fictional images, traditional values (mentality), and individual, idiosyncratic evaluations, co-operate in the continuous construction of such cultural concepts as 'Northernness'.

We could, moreover, try to identify cross-cultural patterns of artistic modelling of 'Northernness'. And we could even look for interactions between different artistic media, like literature and painting.

To conclude, then, I would like to turn to my "exception", a contemporary example that, I think, covers most, if not all, of the essential aspects of the Northern concept discussed before.

The poet Joseph Brodsky (Iosif Brodskij, b.1940) is the author of an oeuvre which can be qualified as Russian, as well as American, and European. And as Northern as well in a highly individual way. He has

written a poem about an (imaginary) exhibition of works by the Dutch magical realist painter Carel Willink (1900-1983). It is interesting to note (cf. Verheul 1989, 244-5) that in this poem Brodsky does not react to particular paintings, but that he presents a synthetic poetic vision of Willink's work as a whole. It can, and, I think, indeed, should, be read as an effort by the poet to catch the meaning of Willink's aesthetic program for him as a poet. Much of Willink's work is dominated by architecture and by impressive atmospheric conditions: buildings, especially of a Mediterranean, stern classical architecture, marble statues, formal gardens, and huge clouded skies. Among the highly individual images Brodsky uses to express his sense of artistic affinity the following characteristics are striking: Northern light, a flat landscape, and the fascination by (Southern, especially classicist) architecture. Some of these are dominant, recurrent motifs in much of his other poetry; first of all the world where he grew up: Leningrad, and the grey, Northern land- and seascapes around the Baltic. At the same time, through the classicist shapes of Leningrad-Petersburg in Brodsky's work the Southern, classical Mediterranean heritage is always present. Later, after he had left the Soviet Union, Venice even more strongly began to make itself felt in his poetry as a southern parallel to Leningrad, or rather to the complex of what one probably could call his 'Northern world' or even his 'Northern urbanism'. Dutch architecture and culture are equally part of his specific poetic universe. In the opening stanza of the Willink poem the essential elements of that world are described as "almost a landscape", and "a Northern location", there are "statues of blond marble", and "a hyperborean rumpling cabbage"; it is a landscape (a "plateau") so horizontal that "nobody will embrace you".

By virtue of these and other, related motifs, other poems too, are drawn into one single poetic world, one individual vision of a Northern, and even specifically Baltic, world, although this is presented with a variety of attitudes which are complex and often ambivalent, or absurd. Thus we have, in a different emotional key, for example, his 'Lithuanian nocturne', written for his Lithuanian friend and fellow poet Thomas Venclova, or his 'Lithuanian divertissement', which opens ('1. Introduction') with the statement that Lithuania is a "modest country near the sea, with its own snow, airport and telephones, and its own Jews"; and also the poem opening with the line: "The north crushes metal, but it spares glass", in which he actually professes to be a Northern poet because "The cold raised

me and put the pen between my fingers, in order to warm them together (a handful)" (*Chast' rechi*, 78); or (idem, 83) about his being a Northern poet in a low key, so to say:

I grew up in Baltic bogs, near waves grey as zinc, that always came
running (up) two by two, and hence the rhymes, doing the same,
hence that dull voice, which winds itself between them like wet hair,
if it does so at all.

But part of this poet's vision of the North is also, for example, the polarity expressed in one of his 'Roman elegies' (IX, *Uranija*, 115). In this poem, looking from the south, he speaks in a different, and peculiar tone:

On these latitudes all windows look to the North, where you drink the
more, the less you mean. The North! A piano frozen into a huge ice-
berg, a tiny pockmark of quartz in a vase of granite, a plain, unable
to arrest the gaze, the running fingers of dear Ashkenazy.

Of course, these are but a few illustrations, and only the material for a coherent description yet to be made. They are part of a poetic world in which we can detect a particularly strong sense of geography as a major organizing principle of its poetic meaning as a whole, and of 'Northernness' in particular.

The ultimate question, then, the question about the poetic and cultural significance of Northernness for the poet Brodsky, as for other poets, can be answered by studying the catalogue, or encyclopedia, of their poetic worlds for the way traditional motifs and clichés of the north are used or developed, how new ones are created, and connected with other motifs, uniting subjective choice and evaluation on the one hand, and on the other hand cultural traditions of diverse origins. In this way 'North' can be defined and used as a cultural concept of individual significance, and at the same time as a collective frame of reference, as a both continuous and changing representation of cultural identity.

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