

FOREWORD

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The five articles that comprise this issue on *Peripheral Figures: British and Irish Receptions of Nordic Literature and Culture* share three goals. The first is to argue that thinking about Nordic literature and culture in terms of peripheries has opened up in the past, and can continue to open up in the future, rich and challenging perspectives on that literature and culture. The second is to contend that the transmission of Nordic literature and culture to other countries, and the influence it has had upon them, has at times been significantly enabled by this association of that literature and culture with a position on a periphery. The third and final goal is to support these claims through case studies taken from the reception of Nordic literature and culture in the British Isles.

It is important to stress that our promotion of the periphery as a focalising point for the study of Nordic literature and culture involves a rejection of the notion that the periphery must necessarily be inferior or subservient to the centre it presupposes. It involves a rejection, too, of any suggestion that the Nordic world or its attendant phenomena can be deemed 'peripheral' in anything like a scientifically objective or natural sense. Rather, we wish solely to demonstrate how the *perception* that Nordic literature and culture carries out some of its most important semantic work as a result of its positioning on the edge of things has the capacity to open up an illuminating field of tropes through which one might profitably run, remodel and thereby analyse the production, transmission and reception of that literature and culture.

It would be foolish to deny that the more 'negative' characteristics commonly associated with a position on a periphery – isolation,

limitation, backwardness and so on – can and do play a determining role in shaping our understanding of artists or artworks associated with that position. This does not mean, though, that this peripheral position must accordingly be identified solely as something artists or artworks must ‘overcome’ if they are to circulate and signify further afield. It is, indeed, often their very engagement with situations of limit and exclusion, and with the sensation of being out-of-sync, for instance, that makes works and activities positioned on these kinds of peripheries so powerfully articulate and available – in a word, transferable – across languages, cultures and geographical borders.

These so-called negative capacities should in any case be set alongside the more ‘positive’ – and equally universalizable – qualities a position on a periphery has traditionally been believed to bestow: of individuality, authenticity, and freedom from (often in the form of resistance to) the prejudices and groupthink of the mainstream. One could even argue that a demonstrable capacity to generate meaning at the margins of their own social, artistic and/or national geographies makes such authors and artefacts especially well situated to relocate to and thrive within the newly reconfigured borderlands every act of transcultural exchange opens up.

We have entitled our set of case studies *Peripheral Figures* in order to highlight two important features of our approach. Most obviously, perhaps, this title emphasises our common practice of selecting one or more figures from Nordic literature and culture and then placing that figure on one or other kind of periphery, thus rendering them ‘peripheral’ in some sense or other. It bears repeating, though, that we do this not in order to express any objective or natural truths about Nordic literature and culture, but to highlight how this practice has in the past made available for reception, analysis and further transmission any number of figurations of that literature and culture which we may choose either to cherish or challenge today. The second feature of our approach highlighted by our title, meanwhile, is the attention we pay to the *figures of the periphery* that are brought into play whenever an artist or artwork is deemed to be ‘peripheral’ in this way. The value of the periphery as a hermeneutic device for opening up alternative perspectives on Nordic literature and culture resides, after all, in the

variety and number of configurations it has the capacity to adopt. Aside from bearing some kind of relationship towards some kind of presupposed centre, one periphery is never entirely the same in nature or character as another; the manner in which the artists or artworks situated there interact, behave or acquire their semantic figurations is accordingly never entirely the same either.

In order to throw the variety of these configurations into greater relief, we have chosen to set them against what is ostensibly a common backdrop. This is why we have restricted our survey to a selection of those peripheries that have featured in the reception of Nordic literature and culture in the British Isles. We hope, though, that our findings will prove applicable for – or, better still, inspire further studies of – the role of the figure of the periphery in Nordic literature, culture and its reception in other national traditions besides. Even within the relatively narrow confines we have set ourselves, both the location and the nature of the peripheries we explore demonstrate a considerable degree of diversity and change. Sometimes those peripheries are associated with the artist's or artwork's point of origin and are to be found either in a specific locality situated within the Nordic world or they are deemed to be peripheries by virtue of their emergence out of the Nordic world as a whole. At other times, the informing periphery sits rather at the point of reception somewhere in the British Isles. None of these peripheries need – or need solely – be spatial either; they can be temporal, cultural, social, spiritual and psychological (amongst other things) too. As often as not, they consist of several of these things combined.

Each of the articles that follows proceeds by establishing the specific nature and configuration of the peripheries involved in the readings of Nordic literature and culture it investigates. Each article establishes, too, the nature and configuration of the equally mobile and shapeshifting centres to which those peripheries correspond. This allows us to trace the lines of connection between the figures of the periphery the receptions we study employ and the figurations of Nordic literature and culture they consequently produce. We have also made it our practice to test the value of these figures and figurations, both for what they say about Nordic literature and culture and for what they omit.

Our study opens with an historical overview by Peter Fjågesund of the various stages and varying significance of the reception of Nordic literature in Britain. Fjågesund demonstrates how the changing senses in which the British imaginary has tended to assign the Nordic countries a peripheral position in the world, and the changing qualities and values it has tended to attribute to Nordic society, nature and culture as a result of their supposedly peripheral status, is reflected in the varying attitudes and openness it has displayed towards the artistic movements, artists and artworks that have come out of those countries. The story Fjågesund tells makes it clear that the British perception of Nordic literature and culture as peripheral, and its corresponding evaluation of that literature and culture as (for instance) either appealing and inspiring or retrograde and uninteresting, depends heavily on Britain's perception of its own place in the world – as a centre, say, of global trade and technological advancement, or as a diminished island on the edges of Europe and an American world order.

The next three articles pursue this interconnection between the British perception of Nordic culture and literature on the one hand and the British perception of the distribution of centres and peripheries within their own islands on the other by considering four writers from the British Isles whose readings of Nordic literature constitute a clear expression of their own self-perceived marginal status within British society and (in all but one case) British geography. First, Silke Reeploeg takes us beyond the north coast of the Scottish mainland to the islands of Orkney and Shetland, where we encounter the work of the Shetland author James John Haldane Burgess (1862-1927) and the Orcadian writer George Mackay Brown (1921-1996). Reeploeg demonstrates how both these writers draw upon Nordic literary traditions in order to liberate their writings and the cultural sphere in which they operate from a position at the margins of a geopolitical landscape dominated by Edinburgh and London and to project them instead into an expanded Nordic arena within which they occupy a more central place. Timothy Saunders then takes us in the footsteps of the twentieth-century Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) as he embarks on a sixty-year journey westwards across Wales, reading Søren Kierkegaard along the way. Saunders discusses the seven poems

Thomas wrote about Kierkegaard during that period and uses them to trace Thomas's evolving sense of how Kierkegaard's aesthetic practices and theological beliefs answered to his own, ever-evolving experiences of geographical, linguistic, cultural, social, spiritual and literary marginality. Saunders argues that Thomas's practice of reading Kierkegaard from a fundamentally de-centred position allows him to adopt the position of the 'single individual reader' for whom Kierkegaard called, and therefore to be manoeuvred by Kierkegaard's literary strategies into the necessarily decentred subject position that alone can bring one (in Kierkegaard's view) into the presence of God.

Inhabiting a rather different spiritual terrain, Giuliano D'Amico's discussion of Henrietta Frances Lord's (1848-1923) translations of Ibsen brings us into the presence of a different set of peripheral positions within the British Isles: those that come into play when the reception of Ibsen is conducted by a woman, a translator and a theosophist. D'Amico demonstrates how Lord's thrice-marginalised status within the hierarchies of gender, literature and religion in late nineteenth-century England enabled her to identify what she perceived to be the significant spiritual qualities of his plays before this kind of reading entered the mainstream anywhere. In D'Amico's view, the insights Lord offers and the strategies by which she reached them have been ignored for too long and are worth revisiting today.

The final article is Juan Christian Pellicer's study of the response by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) to the Danish bog bodies and their presentation by P. V. Glob. Concerned about the propensity of the use of the term 'periphery' to construct and impose an overly rigid and hierarchical configuration of the spaces within which transcultural exchange takes place, Pellicer follows Heaney in using the word 'circumference' to describe the widening horizons of Heaney's cultural experiences and encounters instead. Contending, too, that the material nature of the bog – by no means universal, but nonetheless capable of preserving, restoring and evolving whatever it has been required to host – offers a fit emblem for the formations that emerge out of transcultural exchange, Pellicer foregrounds a powerful and thought-provoking question that Fjågesund and Reeploeg also raise: should not this focus on peripheries in Nordic literature and

culture compel us to think again about the peripheries – the compass, circumference, definition and scope – of Nordic literature and culture itself? This is arguably the most important of the questions with which we hope to leave the reader when this issue, like this foreword, reaches its end.

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