Bayard Taylor’s Northern Travel and the Genders of the North

Abstract

In nineteenth-century travelogues, representations of nature as feminine commonly serve to underscore constructions of masculinity as dominant, controlled and rational. However, feminine language is more readily utilised to describe southern than northern spaces. Thus, southern landscapes are quite often seen as picturesque and coded as feminine, whereas northern landscapes are frequently described as awe-inspiring and sublime and given masculine properties. To some extent, the American travel writer Bayard Taylor’s Northern Travel: Summer and Winter Pictures of Sweden, Lapland and Norway (1858) conforms to a model which genders the land feminine and the traveller masculine, but a factor that seems to influence how a region is discursively gendered is the degree to which the writer is presented as separated from or integrated with the environment. Taylor’s representation of the North as a physically demanding region where the traveller is vulnerable partly undermines the conventionally masculine position of much nineteenth-century travel writing. As a result, the narrative vacillates between reinforcing and undermining essentialist gender polarities, highlighting the problem of gendering physical space.

Key words
Northern travel – gender – male gaze – interaction with nature – mastery of nature

In the period 1856–57 the American travel writer Bayard Taylor (1825–78) visited Sweden and Norway to add yet another segment of the globe to his travel record. Taylor was born in Pennsylvania with a Quaker background and worked as a journalist and editor, though his main aspiration was to be a poet. He is best known as a professional travel writer, however, and from the European tour that resulted in his first book of travels Views A-Foot, or, Europe Seen with Knapsack and Staff (1846) until his death, he undertook a number of longer journeys to different parts of the world, usually with the express purpose of publishing accounts of his experiences on his return. In his time, Taylor was well known and widely read, so much a household name that the editor of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine referred to him as “our friend”; “Where is our American friend, Bayard Taylor? […] We hear that he is inquiring his way toward Lapland, for a ride after reindeers over the snow. Possibly we may meet him by and by at Stockholm.” Shortly after his death in 1878, two biographies appeared attesting to his renown, but today he is virtually forgotten. Research into travel literature has to a great extent concentrated on works about the former British Empire, and in this context Taylor as an American is not a particularly good example. On the other hand, his works demonstrate how writers from outside England were both implicated in...
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and extricated from the imperialist attitudes governing much English writing. Since he visited so many countries, his works also offer the opportunity to compare representations of East and West, North and South.

The account of the Scandinavian tour was published in 1858 as Northern Travel: Summer and Winter Pictures of Sweden, Lapland and Norway. In some respects, Taylor’s text conforms to the nineteenth-century model of representing the traveller as dominating both the landscape traversed and the people encountered, a model which genders the land feminine and the traveller masculine. But at the same time Taylor’s representation of the North as a cold, stern and physically demanding region where the traveller is vulnerable undermines this conventionally masculine position. As a result, the narrative is highly unstable in terms of gender, and vacillates between reinforcing and undermining essentialist gender polarities. In Taylor’s text, the gender of the North is frustratingly elusive: sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine, sometimes neither, and the gendered position of the traveller constantly fluctuates in line with this. Though it may be going too far to argue that Taylor deconstructs common gender binaries, his narrative at least highlights the problem of gendering physical space.

There is a long tradition in Western thought of representing geographical places as feminine. At the macro-level there is Mother Earth, and, from the home to the city and the country, places are frequently imagined as women. Personifications such as Britain’s Britannia, Ireland’s Erin and Hibernia, Marianne for Republican France, Mother Svea for Sweden and Mother Norway rely on and support conceptions of the country as a mother providing for her children or a vulnerable woman in need of protection. Uncle Sam is the best-known exception, but as a symbol for the United States Uncle Sam refers to a political entity rather than a physical place, while the nineteenth-century view of the American West as virgin territory reiterates the connection between woman and space. As Sue Best says, such feminisation “speaks of a persistent desire to domesticate space, to bring it within a human horizon and, most importantly, to ‘contain’ it within this horizon”. Although history, politics and people are equally significant aspects of place, feminising a location emphasises the link between place and nature, a move that assists actual or conjectural domination in a patriarchal culture where both women and nature are downgraded.

The connection between femininity and nature is even stronger than that between woman and space/place. In languages such as Latin and its derivatives, “nature” was a feminine noun, and in philosophy, art and literature from classical times onwards the natural world has frequently been represented as either a nurturing mother or a tempestuous woman. These images have proved exceptionally durable and still govern much thought about nature, from New Age celebrations of the Earth Goddess to the only recently changed custom of giving female names to hurricanes. Feminine nature is a particularly prominent trope in nineteenth-century travel writing, especially in works by men but often in women’s texts, too. Destination points, such as the emblematic source of the Nile or the North Pole, are imagined as women, still and passive, waiting to be discovered by the male or masculinised explorer. Sexualised metaphors are employed to characterise land as virgin, fertile or barren, and words with feminine connotations are used to describe features in the landscape. Forests embrace the visitor and give motherly comfort and shelter, while a jungle may be conceived of as a femme fatale, ensnaring and entangling, yet waiting to be penetrated. A valley cradled by mountains may be symbolically connected with a vulnerable woman in need of protection, but can also be described as lush and voluptuous, inviting comparisons with
a lover or a mother. Mist, drizzle or snow veil a shy, bashful landscape, whereas violent storms may be linked to witches or other active, uncontrollable women who challenge the social order. As Carolyn Merchant says, people “construct nature in ways that give meaning to their own lives”\textsuperscript{5}, and thus the gender order of the social world is projected onto the natural world. In nineteenth-century travelogues, representations of nature as feminine commonly serve to underscore constructions of masculinity as dominant, controlled and rational.

Yet, it seems as if feminine language is more readily utilised to describe southern than northern spaces. The view of North and West as the positive, masculine pole and South and East as the negative, feminine pole is the basis for the mental cartography of the Enlightenment and informs the climatological argument in Baron de Montesquieu’s influential \textit{The Spirit of Laws} (1748). In his text, Montesquieu emphasises the feminine character of the South and gives manly attributes to Northern peoples, and his ideas were taken up and adapted by philosophers and historians such as the German Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) and the Swiss Paul-Henri Mallet (1730–1807). Montesquieu’s view that “the effeminacy of the people in hot climates has almost always rendered them slaves” was particularly useful for European imperial projects, since it offers a “natural” justification for colonial expansion.\textsuperscript{6}

The gendered dichotomy between north and south was certainly firmly entrenched in Anglo-American nineteenth-century thought, the tradition Bayard Taylor belonged to. According to Susan Bassnett, the “nineteenth century saw a proliferation of travel accounts by male writers that overtly sexualised whole areas of the globe, contrasting the ‘masculine’ northern regions with the softer, eroticised, feminised Orient”.\textsuperscript{7} Though Bassnett’s observation is mainly based on descriptions of culture, the categorisation of landscapes as picturesque or sublime are examples of a similar tendency where nature is concerned. The main theoretician of the sublime, Edmund Burke, states in his \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful} (1757) that whatever “is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime”.\textsuperscript{8} Thus, “terror is […] the ruling principle of the sublime”, and, to Burke, there is “nothing sublime which is not some modification of power”. The picturesque, on the other hand, is defined in a rather vague manner by William Gilpin as “such objects, as are proper subjects for painting” in a letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds included in Gilpin’s \textit{Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On the Art of Sketching Landscape}.\textsuperscript{10} The picturesque, in other words, is objectified and can be framed and contained, whereas the sublime is a subject, overpowering and beyond control, visual or otherwise. In nineteenth-century travel writing, southern landscapes are often seen as picturesque and coded as feminine, whereas northern landscapes are frequently described as dramatic, awe-inspiring and sublime, and given masculine properties. Although the meanings assigned to Northern Scandinavia vary and the terminology of the picturesque is often applied to prosperous farming landscapes along the coasts, it is obvious that many foreign visitors were predisposed to view the area as a more masculine space, especially when describing the far North or regions that could be compared to Alpine scenery. Tales of Arctic explorations sometimes follow the pattern of feminising the physical environment, for example through the persistent link between pristine snow and virginity, but the nurturing aspects of nature are absent and the landscape is often represented as rough, jagged, inhospitable and hazardous. Such more masculine terminology is frequently used
about the northern parts of the Nordic countries, too.

In addition to aspects of nature, the cognitive content of place includes history, politics, scientific developments, the presence or absence of polite society and a number of other things. Nineteenth-century views on Scandinavia were tightly bound up with popular knowledge of Scandinavian history, where the Vikings loomed large and the feats of the powerful kings Gustavus II Adolphus and Charles XII were circulated to create a masculine version of the past. The image of the North as the home of manly heroes was supported, among other things, through the world-wide interest in Per Henric Ling’s programme of gymnastics, sometimes referred to as the “Swedish Exercises”. Ling’s gymnastic regime was seen as a cure for degeneration and fed into the discourse of manliness at least in America, but probably also in many European countries.11 Fearing the decline of this muscular masculinity, Bayard Taylor depredes the influence of French customs on Stockholm society in the 1850s, arguing that the Swedes ought “to preserve the fine, manly characteristics of their ancient stock, rather than imitate a people so alien to them in blood, in character, and in antecedents”.12 Manliness is consequently an important aspect of Taylor’s conception of the North.

One effect of the connection between the North and physical prowess in popular thought is that, with the exception of descriptions of the Sami people, the northern body emerges as powerful and masculine in much writing about Scandinavia. In line with this idea, Taylor offers a positive picture of the farming population outside Umeå in northern Sweden: “The people of this region are noble specimens of the physical man – tall, broad-shouldered, large-limbed, ruddy and powerful; and they are mated with women who, I venture to say, do not even suspect the existence of a nervous system” (p. 32). In other remote areas he detects remnants of the Vikings and writes about the Lofoten fishermen:

Handsome they are not, but quite the reverse, and the most of them have an awkward and uncouth air; but it is refreshing to look at their broad shoulders, their brawny chests, and the massive muscles of their legs and arms. […] Such men, I suspect, were the Vikings – rough, powerful, ugly, dirty fellows, with a few primitive virtues, and any amount of robust vices. (p. 248)

As Taylor sees it, the Viking rage has survived in the North of Sweden and could be of great value transplanted to an America grown passive and effeminate:

The people […] are clear-eyed and rosy as the morning, straight and strong as the fir saplings in their forests, and simple, honest, and unsophisticated beyond any class of men I have ever seen. They are no milk-sops, either. Under the serenity of those blue eyes and smooth, fair faces, burns the old Berserker rage, not easily kindled, but terrible as the lightning when once loosed. “I would like to take all the young men north of Sundsvall,” says Braisted [Taylor’s travelling companion], put them into Kansas, tell them her history, and then let them act for themselves.” (pp. 39-40)

Health, vigour, strength and athletic ideals, as well as violence and warfare are connected with the North, and such preconceptions about past and present Nordic culture run in tandem with representations of northern nature as tough and demanding. This does not make the North indisputably masculine, but when compared with accounts of the South the North as a discursive product appears to be at least ambiguously gendered.

Since most discussions of travel writing have been concerned with issues of empire, the idea of the feminine land available for colonisation and control has been thoroughly explored. As a consequence, however, it has emerged as universally present, and there has been little attention to the differences between representations
of northern and southern spaces. Discussing nineteenth-century women’s writing about West Africa, Cheryl McEwan argues that a focus on specific regions and places is necessary if variations are to become visible.13 Susan Morgan gives a similar reason for choosing to concentrate on works about Southeast Asia, saying that “critical concepts derived from considering writings about one area of the world cannot simply be transposed to writings about another area, in some sort of global theoretical move”.14 Limiting the analysis to works about the northern parts of the Nordic countries makes it possible to avoid generalisations based on theories that may not always be applicable to the North, since a micro-perspective allows greater attention to detail and makes it easier to detect contradictions between texts – even within a single work. At the same time, regions do not exist in isolation and their meanings are derived through comparisons and contrasts. To avoid arriving at just another essentialist model, it is therefore useful to compare individual writers’ accounts of both northern and southern spaces when these exist.

* To some extent the perception of place as feminine is embedded in travel writing as a genre, since the standard representation of landscapes as “views” relies on placing the viewer in a position above, and symbolically superior to, the land. The picturesque eye, according to William Gilpin, should “survey nature” not “anatomize matter”: “It throws its glances around in the broad-cast stile. It comprehends an extensive tract at each sweep. It examines parts, but never descends to particles”.15 In travel writing, this possessive, panoramic look appears as verbal paintings of what Mary Louise Pratt terms “the monarch-of-all-I-survey” scenes and, according to Pratt, it “is hard to think of a trope more decisively gendered than the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene. Explorer-man paints/possesses newly unveiled landscape-woman”.16 As Gillian Rose says, to look “actively, possessively, sexually and pleasurably” at landscape is to assume a masculine position, comparable to looking at women as objects.17 The scientist’s mapping, measuring and classifying activities constitute the similarly male-gendered “disembodied gaze of knowledge”.18 Whether aesthetic or scientific, the gaze is consequently theorised as inherently masculine, regardless of the object or who is looking. The gender of the viewer is subordinate to the gender of the viewing position, which means that insofar as they adopt the “male gaze”, women are equally likely as men to represent places as feminine. Under this gaze there is no significant difference between northern and southern spaces. In accounts of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century expeditions to the North Pole, according to Hanna-Mari Ikonen and Samu Pehkonen, northern nature “is an object of mysterious desires and passions, a provider of (mental) subsistence, a visual pleasure”.19 As pleasurable or scientific object, the North differs from the South only in its particulars.

Travel texts usually follow the conventions of visual art when representing scenery so that details are set off against the horizon.20 But it is important to remember that the masculine gaze is not the only way of looking, and that an image is not in itself oppressive simply because similar images have been used historically to legitimate social power and cultural authority.21 There are, for instance, landscapes that are shown to withstand the conquering gaze. Passing the islands off the Norwegian coast north of Trondheim, Bayard Taylor notes: “One is bewildered in the attempt to describe such scenery. There is no central figure, no prevailing character, no sharp contrasts, which may serve as a guide whereby to reach the imagination of the reader. All is confused, disordered, chaotic” (p. 241). Neither can the vast snowfields of the
Arctic be contained in a model based on landscape painting, since there is no cut-off point that separates foreground from background. The Scandinavian forests defy surveillance for similar reasons. Travelling through Sweden in the 1850s, the Irish-born writer Selina Bunbury comments: “[A]n extended prospect is scarce indeed, for forests on a level surface close up the view, and even from an elevation cause a vast dark stretching line to mark the horizon.”

Like the ice deserts, the forests are too large to be surveyed and as a result cannot be appropriated. Though it could be argued that such natural environments embody the uncontrollable, threatening aspects of femininity, they also take on masculine properties by resisting control.

A landscape also emerges as more powerful when it is represented as affecting the visitor emotionally or physically. In her exploration of the sensory order of various cultures, Constance Classen shows that, at least in the West, women have persistently been connected with the “homy” senses of smell, taste and touch, while men have been associated with the “conquering” sense of sight. In line with this gendered hierarchy of the senses, Bayard Taylor’s description of the Vöring waterfall in Norway is initially couched in scientific, detached language that involves primarily visual aspects:

The shelf of rock on which I stood projected far out over a gulf 1200 feet deep, whose opposite side rose in one great escarpment from the bottom to a height of 800 feet above my head. On this black wall, wet with eternal spray, was painted a splendid rainbow, forming two thirds of a circle before it melted into the gloom below. A little stream fell in one long thread of silver from the very summit, like a plumb-line dropped to measure 2000 feet. On my right hand the river, coming down from the level of the field in a torn, twisted and boiling mass, reached the brink of the gulf at a point about 400 feet below me, whence it fell in a single sheet to the bottom, a depth of between 800 and 900 feet.

Could one view it from below, this fall would present one of the grandest spectacles in the world. In height, volume of water, and sublime surroundings it has no equal. The spectator, however, looks down upon it from a great height above its brink, whence it is so foreshortened that he can only guess its majesty and beauty. (p. 315)

At the beginning of the passage, Taylor is the unquestionable reference point, viewing the scene from above. The measurements belong to a scientific rhetoric and give an illusion of exactitude, and compared with other nature descriptions in the text the tone is impassioned and distant. While acknowledging the beauty and grandeur of the cascade, Taylor refrains from infusing his experience with any emotional value, and by privileging sight his description remains firmly outside the landscape. The few aesthetic comments in his description are integrated in the scientific discourse. In this, Taylor follows Alexander von Humboldt, who proposed that reports of emotional reactions to natural phenomena contained important scientific information. Hence, the aesthetic/emotional is subordinated to the scientific. At the end of the passage, however, Taylor maintains that the best way of viewing the waterfall is from below, that is, from a position where the conquering gaze is rendered inoperative. Although the first part of the account conforms to the notion of the masculine traveller/explorer controlling the landscape, Taylor ends the description by suggesting that power rightly should reside with the waterfall, not with the viewer. Thus, despite beginning by showing himself in the traditionally masculine position, Taylor finishes the account claiming that a feminised position in relation to the landscape is actually better.

Gender socialisation may cause women and men to interact with landscapes in different ways, and women travellers sometimes express an emotional connection to the natural world, a sense of being part of the land that reverses the male gaze. For the Victorian traveller Mary
Kingsley, for instance, the Ogowé rapids in West Africa become a source of healing and self-knowledge instead of a spectacle:

The majesty of the scene fascinated me, and I stood leaning with my back against a rock pinnacle watching it. Do not imagine it gave rise, in what I am pleased to call my mind, to those complicated, poetical reflections natural beauty seems to bring out in other people’s minds. It never works that way with me; I just lose all sense of human individuality, all memory of human life, with its grief and worry and doubt, and become part of the atmosphere. If I have a heaven, that will be mine.25

It should be noted, however, that Kingsley’s scientific discoveries were published elsewhere, such as in West African Studies (1899), and that Travels in Africa is a more personal text. Even so, there is a marked difference between the engagement she expresses and the detachment that characterises the first part of the passage in Taylor’s text. A northern parallel to Kingsley’s description is when Selina Bunbury emphasises the mystical properties of the cataracts at Älvkarleby in Sweden:

It was splendid in the morning, when the newly-risen sun, coming forth to do away the effects of the night storm, shone strong on its stream and brought forth the iridescent hues that contrasted so well with the white foam that sprinkled even the tops of the dark firs, standing as they did in solemn state, frowning like the proud magnates of earth on the mad efforts to overcome them; but more strangely beautiful was it in the mysterious light of the northern night – that night of poetry and dreaminess, too soft, it might seem, for a scene so wild, yet lending to it a mystic aspect that brought it into harmony with itself.26

Unlike the Vöring-Foss, as initially represented by Taylor, the Ogowé rapids and the Älvkarleby waterfall cannot be grasped intellectually and controlled, instead they inspire emotions. Nature is still seen as essentially feminine, but the gendered relationship between visitor and landscape is fundamentally different since the traveller is inside nature, acted upon rather than acting.

Mastering nature thus requires that the observer is somehow separated from the environment. The male gaze is disabled when the lay of the land itself resists visual control and when nature is active, affecting the visitor’s senses, emotions and body. To acknowledge emotional or physical responses constitutes an admission of subjectivity that threatens to undermine the writer’s reliability as scientific or aesthetic witness. As opposed to looking at the landscape from a secure vantage point, being in the landscape involves exposure to weather, temperature, sounds and smells, as well as bodily sensations caused by insects, bumpy roads, steep climbs, hunger and thirst. Participating, experiencing and sometimes succumbing to nature is a feminising process, since it engages the body and those senses regarded as feminine.

Since travel is represented as a bodiless enterprise in many travel texts and, as a result, in many theoretical discussions, the gendered relations between traveller and travel object have seemed quite constant. An obvious example is the depiction of foreign peoples in orientalising discourse. The Other has a body and is connected with nature and the feminine, whereas the imperialist traveller is bodiless or has a body constantly kept in check, and is aligned with culture and the masculine. The embodied inhabitant and the disembodied visitor are obviously important features also of travel writing about the North, especially in descriptions of the Sami people, but the ruptures in the paradigm become visible when the writer’s own body is included in the narrative.

The notion that nature demands physical exertion from the traveller or that human beings are helpless against its forces informs many descriptions of northern regions, and in such texts the gender of nature becomes more masculine. In works that privilege the visual, in
contrast, nature is primarily coded as feminine. A crucial factor is the position of the describer in relation to what is described, and since this position is prone to change the gender of the North constantly fluctuates both between and within travel texts about the region.

* The difficulty of conclusively defining the gender of the North can be seen very clearly in Bayard Taylor’s *Northern Travel: Summer and Winter Pictures of Sweden, Lapland and Norway*. Taylor began his trip northward on December 15, 1856, wishing to experience a day when the sun did not rise above the horizon, and in the summer of 1857 he journeyed north through Norway “to see the midnight sun from the cliffs of the North Cape” (p. 204). According to his biographer Russell H. Conwell, the fact that the book could boast descriptions of both a day without sun and a day without sunset “would, in itself, ensure its ready sale.”

Although Taylor paints ambiguous and sometimes fairly contradictory pictures of both northern Sweden and Norway, it is possible to detect a difference between his opinions about the gendered character of the regions. On the whole, the north of Sweden emerges as a more masculine space, partly because the encounter with the North challenges his masculinity and to a certain extent feminises him, but paradoxically partly also because the ordeal provides him with an opportunity to test his stamina and prove his own manliness. The Swedish part of the journey influenced his physical self, since it took place in winter and forced him to confront a harsh climate and difficult travelling conditions. The summer journey through Norway, on the other hand, was not particularly demanding; he even travelled by steamboat for a long stretch of the way, and therefore it was rather his civilised self that was under pressure.

The gendered relation between Taylor and his environment greatly depends on the presence or absence of his body in the narrative. The Swedish journey is shown to affect his body in numerous ways, which produces a picture of nature as more powerful, while the description of Norway privileges sight, which transfers the power back to the viewer. A revealing sign of this change from physical involvement to visual control is that in the north of Sweden Taylor constantly includes temperature readings in the text, whereas in Norway he instead reports the height above the sea of the various localities he visits.

Taylor’s visit to the north of Sweden had a very specific purpose, and in an article in the *New York Tribune* he relates a conversation he had with Alexander von Humboldt just before he set out, where he explains his intentions:

"Why do you choose the winter?" he asked: “Your experiences will be very interesting, it is true, but will you not suffer from the severe cold?” “That remains to be seen,” I answered. “I have tried all climates except the Arctic, without the least injury. The last two years of my travels were spent in tropical countries, and now I wish to have the strongest possible contrast.”

A keyword in the passage is "contrast", and it is clear that the northern journey is meant to form the extreme opposite of Taylor’s sojourns in warmer countries. This means that even before the trip begins he is prepared to note primarily the differences between North and South. Another important clue is his assurance that he has endured all kinds of climates without suffering harm, which indicates that he wishes to show himself capable of conquering the cold as well. He describes how he was warned that he would suffer greatly from the bitter winter, should expect hardship and privations and ought to bring provisions, since nothing could be found in the North (p. 12). Consequently, the initial picture of northern Sweden is that it is an Arctic wilderness, and this is also
the model that governs Taylor’s description. Experiences that cannot be contained in this paradigm are of minor importance.

Taylor’s main desire is to experience true cold, and a letter to his friend George H. Boker clearly illustrates his notions of the North:

In another week I start for Torneå, and by New Year’s day I shall be on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Think of me when you get this as driving my reindeer over the solid snow, in the sunless days of the Polar Circle...

Snow, darkness and a reindeer sleigh-ride are his expectations. He spends much time checking the temperature, and is anxious to leave Stockholm so that he may find “snow and a colder climate” (p. 14). By Christmas he has reached Umeå, where the North finally lives up to his expectations when his companion John Braisted comes running in with the thermometer, shouting in triumph, “Thirty, by Jupiter!” (p. 36). Taylor frequently relates how both his and Braisted’s beards froze to ice (pp. 31, 36, 37, 45), and during a stormy sleigh-trip south of Umeå he endures “a heavy weight of ice on my lids, and long icicles depending from every corner of my beard” (p. 157). This evidence that he has exposed himself to and tolerated extreme cold is exactly what he has wished for, and a fiercely cold sleigh-ride along the Swedish-Finnish border becomes one of the high points of the journey: “The thermometer still showed -44º, and we prided ourselves a little on having travelled for seventeen hours in such a cold with so little food to keep up our animal heat” (p. 78). Taylor used the Réamur thermometer and according to this scale -44º would correspond to -55º Celsius or -67º Fahrenheit. It is unlikely that anybody would remain out of doors for seventeen hours in such cold, but regardless of the accuracy of the temperature reading, Taylor’s account of the desperately cold trip reinforces the idea that being in the North demands considerable stamina and strength. It is revealing that in commenting on Northern Travel in his biography, Russell H. Conwell states that despite the bitter cold, Taylor “kept heroically on his course”. By enduring the northern winter, Taylor becomes a hero.

Bayard Taylor’s winter itinerary in fact included visits to both northern Finland and Norway, and like many other travellers at the time he visited the Norwegian Sami settlement Kautokeino. In the preface to Northern Travel he states that everywhere he goes, he follows the rule “to live, as near as possible, the life of the people” among whom he travels (p. v), and in his account of his time in Africa he writes that “[f]or this climate and this way of life, the Egyptian costume is undoubtedly much better than the European. It is light, cool, and does not impede the motion of the limbs”. This willingness to accept local customs shows a very liberal attitude at a time when at least the officers of the British Navy and the imperial government were constantly warned of the dangers of “going native”. As an American, Taylor could be more relaxed in this respect and perhaps his Quaker background made him more inclined towards tolerance, but his texts also indicate that he was rather critical of British self-sufficiency. There are limits to his empathy, however, and on his northern travels, at least, he only adheres to customs that seem to him to be of immediate use. In Kautokeino he buys some clothes:

Attired in these garments, I made a very passable Lapp, barring a few superfluous inches in stature, and at once realised the prudence of conforming in one’s costume to the native habits. After the first feeling of awkwardness is over, nothing can be better adapted to the Polar winter than the Lapp dress. I walked about at first with the sensation of having each foot in the middle of a large feather-bed, but my blood preserved its natural warmth, even after sitting for hours in an open pulk. (p. 120)
An important reason for his willingness to adopt local habits in the North is that he expects hardships. In Africa, as he describes it, wearing the local costume is a matter of comfort, but in Northern Scandinavia in winter it may be a matter of life and death. The biographer Conwell comments:

With a wisdom that saved his life, he fell with perfect abandon into the habits of Swedes, Finns, and Lapps, as he in turn found himself in their country and society, eating what they ate, and wearing such skins as they wore, and following their habits, excepting their dirt and their promiscuous arrangements for sleeping.32

It is prudent to recognise the value of the residents’ knowledge, when to reject it might cause considerable physical discomfort and even danger. Thus, Taylor also accepts the necessity to eat food of a kind and in a quantity he would never consume in polite society:

We made two Swedish miles by noon, and then took a breakfast of fried reindeer and pancakes, of which we ate enormously, to keep up a good supply of fuel. Braisted and I consumed about a pound of butter between us. Shriek not, young ladies, at our vulgar appetites – you who sip a spoonful of ice-cream, or trifle with a diminutive meringue, in company, but make amends on cold ham and pickles in the pantry, after you go home – I shall tell the truth, though it disgust you. This intense cold begets a necessity for fat, and with the necessity comes the taste – a wise provision of Nature! The consciousness now dawned upon me that I might be able to relish train-oil and tallow-candles before we had done with Lapland. (p. 40)

Taylor’s bodily needs force him to temporarily suspend his civilised persona and take over local customs. Such occasions primarily interrogate his middle-class, North American self and not his gender identity, though it could be argued that adapting to local conditions is a matter of relinquishing control, and, as such, a feminising process. By requiring him to change his habits, the North exercises a degree of power over Taylor, and in the nineteenth century, at least, power was clearly seen as a male virtue.

Even when he describes the beauty of the northern landscape in winter and, so to speak, restores his visual control of the landscape, Taylor sometimes maintains the image of the North as a masculine space by using architecture and art as his points of reference. In comparing a wintry tree to a “Gothic fountain of bronze covered with frozen spray” and the icy ground to “pavements of ivory and alabaster” (p. 50) he transforms nature to culture, emphasising the masculine side of the binary. But it is also when describing the winter landscape that he shows himself to be emotionally affected:

Snow, wind, and frost had worked the most marvelous transformations in the forms of the forest. Here were kneeling nuns, with their arms hanging listlessly by their sides, and the white cowls falling over their faces; there lay a warrior’s helmet; lace curtains, torn and ragged, hung from the points of little Gothic spires; caverns, lined with sparry incrustations, silver palm-leaves, doors, loop-holes, arches and arcades were thrown together in a fantastic confusion, and mingled with the more decided forms of the larger trees, which, even, were trees but in form, so completely were they wrapped in their dazzling disguise. It was an enchanted land, where you hardly dared to breathe, lest a breath might break the spell. (p. 67)

The poetic outburst constitutes an incongruous mixture of visual control and emotional engagement. Taylor first demystifies and domesticates the alien landscape through images culled from the social and cultural world, but then undermines this rhetoric of rationality by acknowledging the magical effects of the view. This is one of the instances when the gendered relation between Taylor and the northern environment becomes profoundly unclear. By first assuming the position of superior, detached viewer Taylor takes on a conventionally male role, but at the same time he masculinises the landscape by describing it in rational and cultural terms. Yet, by succumbing to the charm of
the view he places himself inside the landscape and assumes a more feminine position, but he paradoxically also feminises the landscape by representing it as elusive and mystical. The experience of the North destabilises Taylor's own gender identity, but the gender of the North itself remains equally unstable.

In the end, however, Taylor reaches the conclusion that northern Sweden in winter is “the limbo of Death” (p. 121). The editors of the biography Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor (1884) maintain that the journey was more of an achievement than a pleasure, and Russell H. Conwell describes the trip as “an undertaking more hazardous and uncomfortable than anything [Taylor] had ventured upon before”. The sense that the journey was often far from enjoyable is the impression also of the entries in Taylor’s journal: “much of the way it was a desperate fight with the cold.” His notes reveal that the climate has, after all, been too harsh for him:

I have suffered considerably from this continuance of violent cold; the bridge of my nose is frozen, my bodily temperature is lowered to a chilly point, and I have had a terrible headache over the eyes to-day, from the freezing yesterday. There is a little wind from the west, and I can scarcely bear it on my face. Nothing can be more severe; flaying, branding with a hot iron, cutting with dull knives, etc., may be something like it, but no worse.

The trip was meant as a contrast to journeys in southern regions, and the South finally comes out victorious: “The South is a cup which one may drink to inebriation; but one taste from the icy goblet of the North is enough to allay curiosity and quench all further desire” (p. 112). Southern nature is feminine, lush, fertile and nurturing, whereas the masculine North cannot be conquered, but must be endured. Egypt is invoked as “a world of glorious vitality, where Death seemed an unaccountable accident”, while Muonivaara, where Taylor was at the time, is a place where “[l]ife existed only on sufferance, and all Nature frowned with a robber’s demand to give it up” (p. 112). The north of Sweden is a winter desert, and Taylor concludes that the “polar zone was never designed for the abode of man” (p. 137). As a region of death and hardship, northern Sweden is placed on the masculine end of the scale in relation to the life-giving South, and at some level it is acceptable to be defeated by such an area. Though Taylor is feminised to some extent by his northern ordeal, he also manages to prove his masculinity by showing that he has endured the experience.

The most important difference between Taylor’s journeys in Sweden and Norway is that the Norwegian trip took place in summer. The first part of his tour was an expedition towards darkness and, by extension, death, but the second half was a journey towards light. Apparently the summer of 1857 was gloriously beautiful, with almost no bad weather, and Taylor comments that for “one summer, Norway had changed climates with Spain” (p. 321). Compared to the winter journey in northern Sweden, travelling through Norway was therefore remarkably easy. Another important factor is that northern Sweden at the time offered Taylor “nearly virgin soil for literary cultivation”, while Norway had been a tourist country for quite some time and had already been portrayed in a number of travel books. Hence, Taylor could not represent himself as an adventurous explorer in Norway, but fashioned an authorial role for himself as critic instead. The text indicates that he expects Norway to be more civilised in continental European terms, at the same time as he rather laments the advance of civilisation: “Pianos in Lapland, Parisian dresses among the Lofoedens, billiard-tables in Hammerfest – whither shall we turn to find the romance of the North!” (p. 249). In Taylor’s view, Norway fails
to measure up both to its reputation as saga country and its position as cultured, modern society.

One area where Norway is clearly not civilised enough is in the matter of food. In Sweden, physical exhaustion and cold induce Taylor to eat and appreciate whatever is served, but in Norway he refuses to eat on several occasions because the food does not meet his expectations. At the outset of his trip, he asserts “I always adopt the diet of the country in which I travel” (p. 211), but towards the end he confesses that for “the first time in my life I found my digestive powers unequal to the task of mastering a new national diet” (p. 300). He even arrives at the conclusion that the Norwegian population has degenerated due to their dietary habits:

English travellers whom I have met inform me that in almost every trial they find themselves stronger than the Norwegians. This is probably to be accounted for by their insufficient nourishment. Sour milk and oaten bread never yet fed an athlete. The proportion of the bodies would admit of fine muscular development; and if they cannot do what their Viking ancestors once did, it is because they no longer live upon the spoils of other lands, as they. (p. 327)

On the one hand, Taylor maintains that the Viking strength of the Norwegians has declined, on the other he claims that the people have failed to progress since Viking times. Seeing the farmers in the region of the Tyri Fjord, he reflects:

Here is the stuff of which Vikings were made, I thought, but there has been no refining or ennobling since those times. These are the rough primitive formations of the human race – the bare granite and gneiss, from which sprouts no luxuriant foliage, but at best a few simple and hardy flowers. (p. 215)

Taylor repeatedly criticises the sloth and filth of the inhabitants and reverses the common image of the dirty Oriental by wishing that “the Norwegians could be made Mussulmen for awhile, for the sake of learning that cleanliness is not only next to godliness, but a necessary part of it” (p. 296). There are no indications in the narrative that Taylor is willing to adjust to a Norwegian way of life. On the contrary, the text plainly shows that he regards English and American practices as superior. Required to share a cabin with other passengers on the steamer “Nordkap” on his way to Hammerfest, Taylor reiterates the familiar English and American complaint that “foreigners” do not understand the importance of fresh air:

Here we did very well so long as there were only English and American occupants, who at once voted to have the skylight kept open; but, after two Norwegians were added to our company, we lived in a state of perpetual warfare, the latter sharing the national dread of fresh air. (p. 137)

In contrast to the Swedish journey, travelling in Norway is in many ways represented as a bodiless venture for Taylor. He does not participate in local culture and relates his experiences as an outsider, looking at and judging what he sees and refusing to adapt. As social and cultural space, Norway is clearly feminised in his account.

The feminisation of Norway as natural space may be largely an effect of the season, rather than the features of the landscape, but juxtaposed with the descriptions of northern Sweden, Norwegian nature usually emerges as more feminine, whether through the frequent descriptions of the land as bleak and barren or comments on the difficult “subjugation of virgin soil” (p. 307). Taylor uses feminine pronouns when he describes nature as “throbbing with the fulness of her short midsummer life, with that sudden and splendid rebound from the long trance of winter which she nowhere makes except in the extreme north” (pp. 215-16). The land in early summer is compared to a woman conceiving and having children: “The earth had
only become warm enough to conceive and bring forth flowers, and she was now making the most of the little maternity vouchsafed to her” (p. 254). The city of Bergen is imagined as a woman: “She sat at the foot of her guardian mountain, across the lake, her white towers and red roofs rising in sharp relief against the purple background of the islands which protect her from the sea” (p. 301). The view of Trondheim is contrasted with Italian scenery, however, and as a result, it emerges as more masculine:

The panorama was certainly on a grand scale, and presented very diversified and picturesque features; but I can by no means agree with Dr. Clarke, who compares it to the Bay of Naples. Not only the rich colours of the Mediterranean are wanting, but those harmonic sweeps and curves of the Italian shores and hills have nothing in common with these rude, ragged, weather-beaten, defiant forms. (p. 234)

The feminine “sweeps and curves” of Italy are set against the “rude, ragged, weather-beaten, defiant” character of Norway, establishing a gender-coded binary opposition that reinforces the idea of feminine South and masculine North. But even when he uses more masculine terminology, as in this instance, or when he depicts the landscape in the northernmost parts of the country, Taylor retains his position of power and his right to criticise and judge, positioning himself outside and above the scene he describes. With a few exceptions, such as the isles off the Trondheim coast which resist visual control (p. 241), the gendered relations between Taylor and the Norwegian landscape remain fairly constant. He masters the scenery, whether he criticises, as in the North Cape area (p. 264), admires, as when he views the Riukan Foss (pp. 348-49) or scientifically defines, as he does in the first part of his description of the Voring-Foss (p. 315), and he is rarely emotionally engaged.

The main aspect of the North that affects Taylor’s body and senses is the light. The midnight sun keeps him from sleep, makes him confused and causes him to lose “the perception of time” (p. 279). The bright nights are unnatural: “I never went below and saw my fellow-passengers all asleep around me without a sudden feeling that something was wrong; they were drugged, or under some unnatural influence, that they thus slept so fast while the sunshine streamed in through the port-holes” (p. 280). The phenomenon resolutely eludes visual control and is impossible to contain in a rational model: “I found my physical senses utterly at war with those mental perceptions wherewith they should harmonise. The eye saw but one unending day; the mind notched the twenty-four hours on its calendar, as before” (p. 269).

The only way to control the midnight sun is to represent it as spectacle:

Midway between these two magnificent headlands stood the Midnight Sun, shining on us with subdued fires, and with the gorgeous colouring of an hour for which we have no name, since it is neither sunset nor sunrise, but the blended loveliness of both – but shining at the same moment, in the heat and splendour of noonday, on the Pacific Isles.

This was the midnight sun as I had dreamed it – as I had hoped to see it. (p. 268)

Framed and contained by the headlands of Nordkyn and the North Cape, the sun is reduced to a painting, an aestheticised, visual pleasure that has no power over Taylor’s physical sensations. As passive object, the midnight sun is placed in the feminine category. When it is presented as a powerful, uncontrollable natural phenomenon, its gender is more indeterminate.

Nevertheless, Norway does offer the (male) visitor an opportunity to test and prove his own masculinity. In this, the region has the capacity to function as a cure against the spread of effeminacy in his own culture that Taylor censures:
At the mouth of the Tana we picked up four Englishmen, who had been salmon fishing on the river. They were sunburnt, spotted with mosquito bites, and had had little luck, the river being full of nets and the fjord of seals, between which the best of the salmon are either caught or devoured; but they spoke of their experience with true English relish. "Oh, it was very jolly!" said one: "we were so awfully bitten by mosquitoes. Then our interpreter always lost everything just before we wanted it – think of his losing our frying-pan, so that we had to fry in the lids of our kettles! He had the habit of falling overboard and getting nearly drowned before we could pull him in. We had a rough time of it, but it was very jolly, I assure you!" The young fellows meant what they said; they were all the better for their roughing, and I wish the spindle-shanked youths who polk and flirt at Newport and Saratoga had manliness enough for such undertakings. (pp. 278–9)

The group of Englishmen are shown to have been physically affected by their experience, inside instead of outside the landscape, and as a consequence nature becomes more powerful. It is important to note, however, that the invigorating qualities of the North are primarily available to visitors to the area, not to the inhabitants, in Taylor’s view. Northern Scandinavia becomes a kind of health farm for foreigners, but the people who live there and are constantly exposed to a harsh climate and difficult living conditions become passive and lethargic, defeated by their environment. While in the north of Finland, Taylor reflects:

I was at first a little surprised to find the natives of the North so slow, indolent and improvident. We have an idea that a cold climate is bracing and stimulating – ergo, the further north you go, the more active and energetic you will find the people. But the touch of ice is like that of fire, the tropics relax, the pole benumbs, and the practical result is the same in both cases. (pp. 136–7)

Though it seems clear that Taylor is more inclined to present Norway in feminine terms than northern Sweden, the gendered identity of the country is by no means stable in the text. Norway has offered him less occasion to prove his manliness than Sweden and the summer season has led him to use feminine imagery to a greater extent than when he described the northern winter, but he also shows that some aspects of his experiences, like the midnight sun and the indefinable island scenery, at least partially escape rational and visual control. Peter Fjågesund and Ruth A. Symes suggest that for British nineteenth-century visitors, “the variety of the Norwegian landscape provided examples of both the sublime and the picturesque”. Thus, there seem to be at least two contradictory Norways:

Once upon the broad, level summit of a Norwegian field, one would never guess what lovely valleys lie under those misty breaks which separate its immense lobes – what gashes of life and beauty penetrate its stony heart. There are, in fact, two Norways: one above – a series of detached, irregular masses, bleak, snowy, wind-swept and heather-grown, inhabited by herdsmen and hunters; and one below – a ramification of narrow veins of land and water, with fields and forests, highways and villages. (p. 310)

To describe Norway, Taylor needs to employ both masculine and feminine terminology. Another way of putting it would be to say that, as he sees it, Norway is a combination of male and female; bleak and beautiful, strong and weak, demanding and inviting. His own gendered relations to what he sees and experiences are shown to fluctuate, and as a consequence, his text does not conclusively assign a gender to the area.

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Although Taylor’s text indicates that there may be a tendency in nineteenth-century travel writing to represent the North as more masculine than the South, it seems clear that a number of sometimes conflicting elements determine how a region is discursively gendered. Important external factors are obviously the author’s own
sex and the conventions governing women’s and men’s writing, often resulting in an implicit or explicit gendering of the audience. Internally, the choice of authorial role and the power structures embedded in this role influence the language, form and attitudes of the text and, by extent, the gender of the places depicted. Another important factor is whether the author’s own gender identity is shown to be supported or interrogated by the encounter with foreign conditions and practices. The degree of separation from or integration with the environment appears to be of vital importance, and this strongly depends on the extent to which the writer privileges vision or physical/emotional involvement in reporting his or her experiences. What aspects of place are incorporated are of crucial importance since highlighting historical background or political developments may lead to a completely different image of the gender of a place than when primarily natural features are included. How far the landscape appears to lend itself to be contained in a verbal painting, bounded and domesticated, and how far it is represented as defying visual control are also essential variables. Weather, season and climate affect the picture, and comparisons with other regions may accentuate or downplay the gendered character of a place, especially if opposites like north and south, culture and nature, hard and soft, barren and fertile are established. Bayard Taylor’s *Northern Travel* cannot answer the question of the gender of the North, but what the text illustrates is that there are a number of gendered attitudes available to the traveller vis-à-vis the places visited. The North may be predominantly presented as inviting relations between writer and place that masculinise both, but even within a single text gendered attitudes continuously replace each other so that the textual gender of place finally becomes a succession, alternation and combination of masculine and feminine.

### Notes

4. Official naming of tropical storms and hurricanes began in 1953; male names were added to the list as late as in 1979.
5. Merchant, p. xvi.


17 Rose, op. cit., p. 88.

18 Ibid., p. 107.


30 Conwell, op. cit., p. 257. My emphasis.


32 Conwell, op. cit., p. 257. Original emphasis.

33 Hansen-Taylor and Scudder, vol. 2, p. 331; Conwell, p. 255.

34 Hansen-Taylor and Scudder, ibid., p. 329.


36 Ibid., p. 327.

37 Fjågesund and Symes, op. cit., pp. 280-1.