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Looking for Redemption in a globalised North: Representations of the Arctic in Judith Hermann's short stories *Kaltblau (Cold-Blue)* and *Die Liebe zu Ari Oskarsson (Love for Ari Oskarsson)*

Judith Hermann, born in 1970, is a very successful, emerging young German writer, author of two collections of short stories, *Sommerhaus später* (1998) [*The Summerhouse, Later* (2001)] and *Nichts als Gespenster* (2003) [*Nothing But Ghosts* (2005)]. The stories contained in the first volume are almost exclusively set in modern day Berlin, they have a strong contemporary focus, and show a specific section of German post-unification society: they all portray young bohemians, represented by the author as her peers.

At the publication of *The Summerhouse, Later* Hermann was much praised for her laconic and yet elegiac style of writing, which for effortlessly captures the lifestyle of her generation. At the same time she received quite substantial criticism for focussing so much on her portrayal of young intellectual twentysomethings who live without economic concerns, whose main interest in life seem to be their largely dysfunctional relationships and who exude a general sense of *ennui*. The vapid existence of her "somewhat disoriented and uncommitted" (Ganeva, 251) characters, the unsuccessful thrill-seeking and "event hunting" (Biendarra 2004, 222), in which they indulge, was seen as an expression of the "postmodern subject's avoidance of fixation" (Biendarra 2006, 237).

The disappointed criticism that Hermann wrote beautifully and appealed to readers of her own generation, yet produced largely insubstantial texts and seemed to have very little to say, was voiced even stronger, when *Nothing But Ghosts* was published (Hartwig, Radisch, Spiegel). Many critics expressed

their frustration that this second volume was very similar to the first collection, that its characters were equally disaffected and indecisive as the people in *The Summerhouse, Later*, that Hermann's texts generally dealt with things that never happened, with decisions that were never made (Blamberger) and that the sense of procrastination that pervades these stories could be very frustrating to the reader. As one reviewer said with exasperation, it is not an easy task to "look over these characters' shoulders for the duration of sixty pages instead of just shaking them awake" (Krekeler, my translation).

However, there is one very obvious difference between Hermann's two very similar books. In *Nothing But Ghosts* the characters leave the new Germany and travel. Hermann, yet again a close observer of her peers, now "provides the generation of globalization with its basic texts" (Böttiger, my translation). The stories are set in Italy, America, the Czech Republic, to name but a few locations. For Hermann's affluent, artistic characters being able to travel is not a privilege, it is an important part of life. Travelling lends a spatial dimension to the "aimless drifting" (Biendarra 2006, 238) they indulge in psychologically. As Ellen, the main character in Hermann's title story "Nothing But Ghosts" explains: "It's not unusual [...]. A lot of people live like that. They travel and look at the world, and then they come back and work, and after they've earned enough money, they're off again, to somewhere else. Most of them. Most people live like that." (143)

Despite the central function that travel is assigned in these stories it is difficult to say what exactly it is that the characters hope to experience on the road and what, if anything, they gain from their numerous trips. The globalised world in which they move facilitates travel and yet seems to offer so little which is worth seeing and their experiences seem to have no impact on the characters. Ellen describes her journey across the US stating: "I know I was there, but there's nothing I can tell you about it". It is "as though the trip had never taken place as though she and Felix had not been" (NBG 121). This lack of meaning and purpose as well as the inconsequentiality of the characters' actions is a characteristic trait throughout the book and has been termed

“tristesse globale” (Radisch). The characters adopt the pose of global flâneurs (Ganeva), they observe without getting involved. Consequently the foreign locations, as exotic as they may seem, all become interchangeable: “Never mind that we were in Prague. We could just as well have been in Moscow or Zagreb or Cairo.” (NBG, 206.)

But wherever this uprooted young generation goes, Berlin, the city of change, remains their main point of reference and in a sense their spiritual home. Berlin is what they talk about and what they long for whether they are stuck somewhere in the German province or driving through the Texan desert. The role of the German capital as the characters’ gravitational centre is far from being challenged by any of the places they visit.

Critics have noted with disappointment that on these random journeys Hermann’s characters forfeit their chance for an epistemological experience in a foreign country, away from home (Stuhr, 38). Admittedly, it is accurate to say that the traditionally educational purpose of travel as well as the human urge to explore are implicitly denied and rejected in Hermann’s books. However, I would argue that this criticism is not only unreasonable in so far as it unfairly projects the critic’s ideals and demands onto a work of fiction but also that it cannot be applied in equal measure to all the narratives in *Nothing But Ghosts*. The fact that the two stories which are set in Scandinavia differ significantly from the other texts in terms of providing a meaning for the characters has so far been sadly neglected. In these stories Berlin’s prime position is, for the first time, challenged by other locations, by the allure of the northern periphery.

Cold-Blue (Kaltblau) and *Love for Ari Oskarsson (Die Liebe zu Ari Oskarsson)* are set in Iceland and Norway respectively. *Love for Ari Oskarsson* has one of Hermann’s typical first person narrators, a young female musician who leaves Berlin to perform at the Northern Lights festival in Norway. With her close friend and band colleague Owen she travels to Tromsø. They see this simply as “a chance to take a trip, a trip somewhere” (NBG, 224-225) and Norway seems a random choice of destination. When they arrive in Tromsø they are informed that the festival has been

cancelled. Reluctantly they book themselves into a small guest house and decide to stay for a few days, regardless. Like so many of Hermann's characters the narrator in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* regrets that she does not have a fulfilling romance in her life. As she sits in her hotel room she ponders her friendship with Owen: "I wouldn't fall in love with Owen, nor Owen with me. It was a big relief to know this, and at the same time it was also sad" (NBG, 238). Throughout the text it is obvious that the narrator is very close to Owen – despite her claim that they are "different, lived different lives" and could easily go separate ways (NBG, 224). Yet she knows what makes him happy, she knows his biggest fear and in some ways has a more intimate bond with him than his current girl friend whom he carelessly left behind in Berlin.

Left on her own at the hotel while Owen wanders through Tromsø the narrator turns to self-analysis: "Coincidence had swept me up and dropped me into this room so that I would find out something about myself, about how things were supposed to proceed from here on, with me and with everything else" (NBG, 233).

This state of self-wondering and reflection, the search for a purpose in life, is not uncommon for Hermann's characters who constantly doubt their own decisions, unsure of whether a better life is waiting for them somewhere. At the same time the narrator's process of self-exploration forms part of a dominant northern discourse. It has been observed that generally "northern society and landscape have been presented in stereotypical terms by people who have gone north to 'discover' things, quite often themselves" (Coates/Morrison, 5) True to this tradition Owen goes out to explore the town while the narrator stays in and embarks on an inner quest of self-exploration. Once she has reconciled herself with the new idea of being up North she wants to stay there and hopes to "stop time" and "hide forever" (NBG 259). This newly found and somewhat unexpected purpose to her trip is mirrored in the way Tromsø and its inhabitants are portrayed in the text. What little she sees of the town at first seems to fit her expectations of the north as a large stereotypically unwelcoming space. She

remarks that Tromsø is an “exceptionally bleak” “city in the north” (NBG, 226). When she first meets the owner of the guest house she is pleased that he and his outer appearance also corresponds to national stereotypes. As she remarks ironically: “He wore a Norwegian sweater and felt slippers; I would have been disappointed if he had looked any different”. (NBG, 229).

However, this image of Tromsø as a barren *ultima thule* inhabited by typical northerners wrapped up warmly against the cold is only part of what she sees. Despite being situated beyond the arctic circle Tromsø bears all the usual signs of globalisation. There is a Mc Donalds franchise – the classic symbol of international capitalism - English and German are spoken with ease, whereas Norwegian hardly features as a language, and one of the few Norwegians she meets looks decidedly Polish. Even the hotel room does not correspond to her preconceived ideas of Scandinavian living, instead it reminds her of New York hotel rooms and she half expects to find “Soho, or Little Italy, or First Avenue in the East Village [on the other side of the window]” (NBG, 230). Rather than a place of wild, sublime beauty Tromsø is described as very much part of globalised Western civilisation. In order to get this across to the reader Hermann does not shy away from deliberately manipulating and misrepresenting geographical facts. Her description of Tromsø is full of inaccuracies: The Northern Lights Festival does not take place in October but in January. Unlike in the story, there is no island with a light house outside Tromsø. Even the Mc Donald’s does not exist. The distances in Norway are portrayed similarly inaccurately, which prompted one local reviewer to comment that Hermann had most likely never been to Tromsø because in the text the town seems to be only a short bus journey away from Oslo (Willersrud). However, I would argue, that the supposedly wrong distance is in fact meant to illustrate the lamentable fact that even this extremely northern city is part of Western civilisation and within easy reach. It is not the mythical *ultima thule* traditionally associated with locations beyond the arctic circle, nor does it offer the limitless space and uncontrollably wild northern nature the narrator appears

to be looking for, and she never gets to see the “fjords and waterfalls” (NBG, 229) she fantasises about.

It would now be easy to assume that because of the many clearly identifiable factual errors in the town’s description Tromsø merely functions as the “epitome of a dreary provincial town as far away from Berlin as possible” (Willersrud, my translation). Indeed, this disregard for the geographical realities of Norway also seems to confirm the often voiced view that the locations in Hermann’s stories are arbitrary and merely serve as “outward props whose only function it is to provide an exotic framework” (Biendarra 2006, 238) whilst the characters’ return to Berlin is always guaranteed.

However, it has also been observed that despite the apparent interchangeability of places in *Nothing But Ghosts* the north is particularly well suited to Hermann’s stories (Böttiger). Even though the „uninterrupted space and void“ [eine von nichts unterbrochene Weite und Leere] (Böttiger) associated with the northern landscape turns out to be an intangible illusion the north nonetheless has something special to offer Hermann’s characters.

When the narrator finally leaves her hotel room she embarks on a strange flirtation with a married man who initiated her invitation to Tromsø. She tells him she has decided to stay in Norway and asks him to show her the beauty of the surrounding landscape but he refuses. Once again the wild north escapes the narrator. But in the end she reunites with Owen who takes her to see his favourite spot in Tromsø. Under the aforementioned lighthouse – a beacon which once again symbolically highlights the characters’ need for orientation – they laugh about insincere declarations of love that they made to other people the night before and are then surprised by a sudden show of northern lights. This spectacle of “exploded stars” – which is how Owen describes the *aurora borealis* – provides the couple with a brief and unexpected epiphany. Thrown together once more they watch the lights and the narrator professes for the first time that she is “very happy” (NBG, 262) something which is very unusual for Hermann’s characters (Böttiger).

It could be argued that this seems like a treacherous sort of happy ending which offers the protagonists no more than a glimpse of what continues to escape them and does not provide any real sense of revelation or redemption. However, the significance of this brief scene of transitory yet heart-felt happiness is underlined by its position at the very end of the book. It is also characteristic that the author herself declared *Love for Ari Oskarsson* to be her favourite story because, “something remains open at the end, there is a note of optimism [Weil da am Ende noch etwas offen bleibt, da gibt es etwas Optimistisches]“ (Meyer-Gosau).

The liberating and exhilarating effect that the singular natural phenomenon *aurora borealis* has on the characters in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* corresponds closely to the author’s own travel expectations. In an interview Herman declared: “I always travel hoping that I might somewhere find something which will redeem me from the things which obstruct me and to which I am attached” (Mensing/Messmer, my translation). I argue that the empty spaces associated with the arctic as well as the impressive and alien natural phenomena such as the Northern Lights which can only be observed in open nature up north provide an inspiration for Hermann’s characters on their quest for redemption from a tangle of meaningless relationships.

A similar process of realisation and self-analysis can be observed in the second story which takes place in an arctic country. *Cold-Blue* is set in Iceland and is unusual in its choice of narrator: Jonina. Unlike Hermann’s other characters she is not part of the bohemian scene in post-unification Berlin, instead she is a native of Iceland, a tourist guide who has travelled herself in her younger days but who now makes a living showing tourists round her home country. She knows the international travel business from the inside and is the one who provides tourists with wow experiences that they can take back to their home countries. Like Hermann’s other characters she is a child of globalisation and spent her university years in Vienna, similarly her boyfriend lived in Berlin for a number of years. Again like most of Hermann’s characters, Jonina feels a certain dissatisfaction in her life which

she finds difficult to pinpoint. Her relationship with her boyfriend Magnus is dispassionate and lacks an emotional intensity. Sometimes he seems like a stranger to her.

Jonina pretends to laugh at the “bewildered enthusiasm” (NBG, 67) which the tourists display when they are confronted with the Icelandic landscape but she secretly longs to be able to see her home country in a similar way, to have to struggle for words to describe it adequately and to feel the “therapeutic effect the landscape seems to have on the tourists” (NBG, 67). It is repeatedly emphasised that Iceland can be considered to be the “end of the earth” (NBG, 64, 66, 82, 87) a peripheral space, but this familiar topos in arctic narratives, the search for the final frontier, is deconstructed by Hermann. Like Tromsø which seems much closer to Oslo than it actually is and which is characterised as a part of globalised, Western society, Iceland is not the “magical place” (NBG, 69) that tourists expect and the sublime, which has long been associated with untouched northern nature (Singer, 33), no longer seems an adequate category. Instead Iceland is a modern state that defies the unfriendly climate and makes ingenious use of the country’s natural resources, in particular the hot springs. In Hermann’s Iceland civilisation and technology have conquered the forces of the wilderness and the effects of globalisation have produced a generation of young professionals who after years of study abroad return home to live in urban lofts, drinking green tea – just like people might do in New York or London.

Jonina and Magnus are part of this urban generation and know nothing of the ancient concepts of nordicity. When confronted with terms such as *ultima thule* and *Valhalla* Jonina and Magnus react with complete ignorance. It is in fact highly unlikely that this educated couple would be so unfamiliar with their cultural heritage and – as in the case of the geographically inaccurate description of Tromsø – Hermann’s readers must again suspend their disbelief. The author’s intention however, is clear. Concepts such as *ultima thule* are inadequate descriptions of northern life. A mythical understanding of the north is in this way dismantled in *Cold-Blue*, yet at the same time its validity is not

completely denied. When Jonina and Magnus have visitors from Berlin, the contagious enthusiasm of Jonas who marvels at everything he sees, lets Jonina move beyond the real north which she inhabits and makes her see the imagined, mythical Iceland: “For the first time she has the feeling that she lives in a country in which smoking volcanoes and spewing water lead to an answer to all questions, an answer you cannot decipher and which is nevertheless sufficient” (NBG, 79). Similar to the characters in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* Jonina longs for an experience to give her life a meaning, for some kind of revelation or vision and like Owen and the narrator she witnesses an epistemological moment which quickly passes.

Guided by Jonas and the photos he takes she sees the beauty of the Icelandic landscape, encapsulated in “one, much too brief blue hour” (NBG, 45). She experiences an epiphany similar to Owen’s vision in *Love for Ari Oskarsson*. This apparition does not provide the redemption or revelation she is hoping for, like for the characters in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* there will be no consequences to her actions and yet this brief moment of ecstasy stays with her.

It has, I hope, become clear that Hermann’s characters are without exception caught in an existence that is strangely without purpose. They travel to escape their stagnant lives for a limited period of time and it often seems irrelevant where they go. Despite this indifference and despite the inconsequentiality of their travels there is one destination which offers a higher potential for a meaningful experience. To go north, to aim for the periphery, even if that becomes increasingly impossible as global civilisation spreads into even the remotest regions and the myth of the final frontier disappears, offers true epistemological potential – albeit only in the shape of a transitory vision.

The narrator in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* who has the strange idea of leaving Berlin behind and settling in Norway, and Jonina who is reconciling herself with life in her northern home country are the only characters in the book who are not simply passing through and continue on their way, completely unchanged. The quote from a Beach Boys pop song which Hermann, in a

seemingly ironic, flippant manner chose as the motto for her book only really applies to these characters in the north: “wouldn’t it be nice / if we could live here / make this the kind of place / where we belong”. It does not seem like any of the characters in the book will ever truly belong, yet the one place where they would even consider staying is the north. At the same time the unattainability of a space or a place which holds the epistemological qualities associated with the north in both the literary tradition and in Hermann’s texts, is highlighted in the geographical inaccuracies of her portrayal of Tromsø and in the touristic perspective chosen in *Cold-Blue*. Ultimately both the narrator in *Love for Ari Oskarsson* and Jonina are chasing a fleeting vision, a place that is non-existent outside the realm of the mythical north. Yet their experiences of a meaningful revelation are depicted with a sincerity that is difficult to ignore.

The somewhat dissatisfying yet hopeful conclusion which must be drawn from these observations points towards the simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction in Hermann’s stories of the myth of the north as a remote empty space which invites processes of exploration and self-exploration. With an ambivalence that is typical of this author’s works, the characters’ self-exploration does not lead them to any change in behaviour, their lives remain largely untouched by their stay in the north and yet in the end they experience brief moments of an arctic revelation which powerfully re-establishes the concept of the mythical north in the reader’s mind.

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