Introduction to Nordic Cultures

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Nordic Nature: From Romantic Nationalism to the Anthropocene

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

Designed by the architects Todd Saunders and Tommie Wilhelmsen, the dramatic Stegastein observation deck, perched 650 metres above the spectacular Aurlandsfjord in the Sogn og Fjordane region of Norway, was conceived as part of a nationwide project to promote nature tourism (see this book’s cover image). It is no coincidence that the British art historian and broadcaster, Andrew Graham-Dixon, chose this backdrop of Norwegian mountains and fjords to introduce his three-part television series *Art of Scandinavia* (BBC 2016). In this series, Graham-Dixon contemplates how the spectacular Nordic natural environment, these ‘landscapes of forbidding beauty’, has shaped not only the art of Scandinavia, but the cultures, societies and the inhabitants of these ‘dark lands’ themselves:

> You could say the Scandinavian mind itself has been shaped by nature, like a landscape formed by a glacier. Despite their remoteness, the Nordic peoples have managed to fashion one of the most remarkable civilisations. And the art of Scandinavia shares many of the characteristics of the Scandinavian landscape – hardness, sharpness, clarity. I think the north has also given it some of its most distinctive moral and psychological characteristics. Pride, tempered by a sense of living at the margins – anxiety, loneliness, melancholy. And blowing through it all, like a cold, piercing wind, an absolute determination to endure, come what may.

(Graham-Dixon 2016)

Despite the varied geography and cultures of the Scandinavian countries, from the sparsely populated high mountains of Norway to the flat and
densely populated island-nation of Denmark, Graham-Dixon’s essentialist notion that a particular ‘Scandinavian mind’ has been shaped by a particular Nordic nature has deep roots in a tradition, going back to at least the early nineteenth century, of perceiving the North as a homogeneous whole.

According to the cultural historian Joep Leerssen, the outside image or the xenostereotype of the Nordic countries has been deeply influenced by a ‘North-South schematization of temperamental oppositions’, where the North is considered cool, frugal, cerebral, morally inclined and the South warm, sensual, opulent and immoral (Leerssen 2009, 16). This kind of environmental determinism is nowadays generally regarded as defunct, but it has exerted a powerful hold on the imagination. Leerssen describes it thus: ‘[c]limate is associatively correlated with landscape, with human habitation patterns, with social and political organization, and in turn rationalized by reference to the inhabitants’ purported “character”’ (16).

Graham-Dixon’s sense of a Nordic mentality shaped by the region’s geography is by no means a unique example; it has long been a dominant trope in how the Nordic countries have been perceived abroad and how, in turn, the Nordic countries have moulded their own self-image, their own autostereotype:

[C]limatic and geographic characteristics of the Nordic countries – such as the light spectacle of the midnight sun – are combined with stereotyped ideas of naturalness, authenticity, and purity and are mythically or even magically charged. Idealizing topoi of longing serve as a kind of branding specific to the region […]. They are functionalized as self-images or public images to create a region-spanning identity of the North.

(Alsen and Landmann 2016, 14–15)

While environmental determinism is a disputed theory of what makes a nation, a region and its inhabitants, this chapter explores how natural environments, and the pictorial and poetic invention of certain ‘Nordic’ landscapes, have contributed to the formation of deep-seated identifications with places that are deemed recognisably Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish or, indeed, Nordic (Olwig and Jones 2008, xi). When Graham-Dixon contemplates the scenery in Norway he is not, in fact, looking at a natural environment, but is instead taking part in a long tradition of creating landscapes, defined by Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels as ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing,
structuring or symbolising surroundings’ (1988, 1) (see also chapter 2 in this volume).

Landscrapes have played a central role in the formation of national identities, including from within the Nordic region, through the power of images to create cultural memories. According to Simon Schama:

[I]nherited landscape myths and memories share two common characteristics: their surprising endurance through the centuries and their power to shape institutions that we still live with. National identity […] would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland (1995, 15–16).

The first part of this chapter will explore how painters and poets in the first part of the nineteenth century, often referred to as the Romantic period, began to re-imagine the natural world and Nordic spaces as particular landscapes in order to forge national identities and belonging in an age of European political upheavals. The second part will explore how such inherited relations between humans and the environment are being re-examined in an age of global environmental crisis, in the age of the Anthropocene, where natural environments have become, at the same time, fragile and threatening places.

The Invention of Nordic Landscapes

The invention of national landscapes in the Nordic countries was intricately tied to the rapid development of geology as a science in the first part of the nineteenth century. In this period, natural philosophers and geologists fundamentally revised the history of the earth, partly by including ourselves within nature as taking part in an interrelated organic whole. This had a profound impact on how artists and poets would rethink the relationship between nature and culture, where the natural world was no longer imagined as external and subordinated to a human will and rational mind. In the age of the Anthropocene – our current geological age, so named to signify the profound effects of human activities on the earth’s crust, the atmosphere and the environment – we continue to ponder how human activities may be better attuned to environmental coexistence (see Gremaud and Hedin 2018; Körber, MacKenzie and Westerståhl Stenport 2017).
In the Nordic countries, the impact of geology and natural philosophy on the arts can be traced back to a series of events beginning in the summer of 1802, when the Danish-Norwegian geologist and natural philosopher Henrich Steffens (1773–1845) returned to Copenhagen from four years of study in Germany. In Jena, a few years previously, he had studied the natural philosophy (Naturphilosophie) of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), and then mineralogy under the influential geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner (1749–1817) in Freiberg, where he also published his main scientific work *Beyträge zur innern Naturgeschichte der Erde* (Contributions to the internal natural history of the earth) in 1801.

In Copenhagen the following year, he gave a series of nine lectures at Elers Kollegium where he introduced German Romanticism to several central figures in what became known as the Danish Golden Age. Among the listeners were the pastor, poet, historian and ideological father of the Danish folk high school N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), and the Danish ‘national’ poet and playwright Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), who was to be crowned with a laurel wreath as the king of Nordic poetry in the cathedral of Lund in 1829.

Steffens’ lectures were influenced by Schelling’s organicist thought that every part exists for the whole and the whole for each part, that everything from minerals and plants to animals and humans, the historical progress of culture, the geological layers of the earth and the heavens, are connected by a common spirit. A special place was reserved for the poet, who could harmonise conflicts and express the connections between the material world and the immaterial spirit in poetic language by recording the evocation of sensations.

Oehlenschläger was in 1802 an aspiring poet who heeded Steffens’ call. Following one of the lectures, according to his memoirs, he spent sixteen hours in conversation with Steffens and the next morning wrote down the poem ‘Guldhornene’ (The Golden Horns), which would come to stand as the breakthrough of Romantic poetry in Denmark when published in *Digte 1803* (Poems 1803). In this famous poem, Oehlenschläger gives poetic form to Steffens’ organicist thinking, lending a voice to nature in his frequent use of anthropomorphism, and providing his own age with a sense of deep connection to a glorious past only waiting to emerge out of the soil to those few who:

\[
an \text{det Høie} \\
i \text{Naturens Øie,} \\
som tilbedende bæve \\
for Guddommens Straaler, – i Sole, i Violer,
\]
The poem centres on the discovery of the fifth-century Golden Horns of Gallehus in a field in Southern Jutland in 1639 and 1734 and the theft of the horns in 1802. Yet it is also a larger drama of history where the Norse gods allow the horns from an ancient golden age to reappear at the feet of a young infatuated girl in the present. Steffens’ spirit of conjoined nature reveals itself in ‘En sagte Torden / dundrer! / Hele Norden / undrer!’ (‘A peal of / distant thunder! / The North’s / in total wonder!’ (140–1) as the horns emerge from ‘earth’s black hold’. Oehlenschläger’s poem exemplifies the confluence of two significant ‘discoveries’ associated with Romantic nationalism: on the one hand, a ‘new’ scientific understanding of an interdependent natural environment and, on the other, the realisation that art and poetry could be used to shape national identities by assuaging and connecting a turbulent, modern present to a deep cultural, mythic and geological past.

Mountain Envy in Danish Romantic Landscapes

The preoccupation in the Romantic age with the natural world and, especially, the ability of art and literature to create a sense of authentic connectedness between a gradually more urbanised modern experience and an idealised landscape beyond the city gates, would grow into a Romantic nationalist movement. Understood as ‘the celebration of the nation (defined by its language, history, and cultural character) as an inspiring ideal for artistic expression; and the instrumentalization of that expression in ways of raising the political consciousness’, Romantic nationalism in Scandinavia grew out of German Natural Philosophy and responded to a wider European configuration of nation states in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (Leersen 2013, 9).
Particularly in Denmark, the Golden Age of the early nineteenth century and its soon dominating Romantic nationalism was directly tied to external political pressures and subsequent internal fractions. Denmark lost its sizable fleet to the British in ‘Slaget på Reden’ (the Battle of Copenhagen) in 1801 and in the Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807, as a result of Denmark siding with France in the Napoleonic Wars. Denmark’s subsequent participation in the wars became a costly affair leading in 1813 to uncontrollable inflation and state bankruptcy. Following Napoleon’s defeat in 1814, the Treaty of Kiel forced Denmark to hand over Norway, which had been in union with Denmark since 1380, to Sweden. Denmark, once a North Atlantic power, had lost around two thirds of its territory, and now had to rebuild a small-nation identity, as Norway embarked on a path towards full independence.

In both Denmark and Norway, poets and artists used their art to celebrate aspects of their nations by providing an imagined conflation of national, historical and geographical belonging. While not previously considered the preeminent genre of painting, landscape painting became the preferred instrument in Scandinavia to capture a Romantic notion of national identity. Christopher Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853) was one of the first Danish painters to explore the link between geology and a Romantic aesthetic sensibility with his ‘Udsigt af Møns Klint og Sommerspiret’ (The Cliffs at Møn. View to Sommerspiret, 1809). The painting is one of many from the first decades of the century to centre on one of the most distinctive features of the six-kilometre stretch of chalk cliffs along the eastern coast of the Danish island of Møn in the Baltic Sea: the chalk formation called Sommerspiret. These cliffs ‘became an important site for the development of geology in Denmark during its heroic age – the years between 1790 and 1840 when geology was consolidated as a science internationally’ (Hedin 2013, 77). In the same period, the site became frequented by painters, who sought landscapes where the natural environment would have its most authentic and powerful impact on human emotions. The spectacular, towering coastal chalk formations were the closest the mostly Copenhagen-based artists could get to experiencing the sublime in situ: ‘The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature […] is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror,’ according to Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* ([1757] 1887, Part II, sect. 1).

In Eckersberg’s painting, the sublime sensation is captured in a female figure who turns away from the view as if horrified by its height and scale. She is held gently by a male figure, who appears to be trying to
convince her of its beauty when viewed from a safe distance behind the wooden railing of the viewpoint. Less interested in a realistic depiction of the chalk formations and the surrounding vegetation, Eckersberg turns nature into a landscape (see Cosgrove and Daniels’ previously quoted definition of landscape) pre-prepared to stimulate particular human desires as a tourist site, thereby pointing to the connectedness, the distractions and attractions, between an idealised natural environment, human bodies and emotions.

Perhaps it was the loss of Norway with its sublime mountainous wilderness that inspired a degree of mountain envy in Danish painters in the nineteenth century. Johan Thomas Lundbye’s (1818–48), ‘En Dansk Kyst. Motiv fra Kitnæs ved Roskilde Fjord’ (A Danish Coast. View from Kitnæs on Roskilde Fjord, Zealand, 1843), picks up the fascination for geological formations and majestic cliffs in a monumental painting that seeks out a more common Danish motif from the island nation’s long stretches of coast line (see Figure 11.1). While Lundbye attends to the smallest details of vegetation in the foreground, the two life-like figures on the beach with a horse-driven cart that has lost a wheel, and the iconic

![Figure 11.1](image-url) The Danish painter Johan Thomas Lundbye’s (1818–48) ‘En Dansk Kyst. Motiv fra Kitnæs ved Roskilde Fjord’ (A Danish Coast. View from Kitnæs on Roskilde Fjord. Zealand, 1843). Oil on canvas. 188.5 × 255.5 cm. Source: Statens Museum for Kunst.
Danish beech trees crowning the cliff, he has made the cliff appear dramatically higher than it was, as if emphasising the reach of the roots that connect the Danish cultural landscape above to its foundation below through layers of sedimented rock and geological deep-time.

Lundbye’s landscape painting was part of the heated contemporary debates about national identity in the 1840s – debates that would reach their zenith with the end of absolute monarchy and the adoption of Danmarks Riges Grundlov, the democratic constitution that made Denmark a constitutional monarchy governed under a parliamentary system in 1849. In the arts it was particularly the art historian N.L. Høyen (1798–1870) who influenced artists to place their work in the service of the nation. In his 1844 lecture, ‘Om betingelserne for en skandinavisk nationalkunsts udvikling’ (On the preconditions for the development of a Scandinavian national art), he said:

The history of Scandinavia, based on the fundamental characteristics of the country and its people, is the raw material from which the art that we have received fully formed from abroad must be reborn among us [...] Only then will the people recognize in it bones of their bones and flesh of their flesh, and only then will it be dear to them, like a child to its mother, when its features arouse holy, deeply entrenched memories [...] The Scandinavian must first be perceived in his complete uniqueness, our sense must first be sharpened to awareness of the grandiose and the familiar in the nature that surrounds us, before we can hope to have a national, historical art.

(cited in Vammen 2002, 252–3)

Danish painters like Lundbye sought out the ‘grandiose and the familiar’ in nature, and painted landscapes deemed characteristic and particular to the nation, which not only promised to connect the present to a deep national history, but also to produce new cultural memories for a future more self-conscious nation. Although very little was left of a wild or ‘authentic’ Danish natural environment in the nineteenth century, as agriculture and deforestation had all but cleared the woodlands and coniferous trees were being introduced from Germany, the Danish painters found the tall light-green beech forest to be ‘authentically’ Danish.

Paintings of beech forests would proliferate throughout the century, most famously in Peter Christian Skovgaard’s (1817–75) idyllic ‘Bøgeskov i maj. Motiv fra Iselingen’ (Beech Forest in May, 1857). The long sandy coasts, flat lands and open sky became preferred subjects of Lundbye, who, like several of his contemporaries, would dot his landscapes with
ancient stone barrows to illustrate the ‘entrenched memories’ linking the Danes to a deep heroic past – as in ‘En gravhøj fra oldtiden ved Raklev på Refsnæs’ (An ancient burial mound by Raklev on Refsnæs, 1839). With the Romantic nationalist movement, the organicist ideal of a spirit connecting the material and immaterial world, geology and history, became a programme for a renewed national ‘spirit’ connecting the people, their history and future, to an idealised, imagined landscape through a stock of national icons.

Such ‘landscaping’ of national identity had already found its way into poetry. In Oehlenschläger’s ‘Der er et yndigt land’ (There is a lovely country, 1819), today known as Denmark’s national anthem, the country is described as ‘et yndigt Land, / Det staaer med brede Bøge / Nær salten Østerstrand’ (a lovely land / with spreading, shady beech-trees, / Near a salty eastern shore), an always sunny, pastoral and mythic landscape (‘Og det er Freias Sal’ [and it is Freya’s hall]) where, in ancient days, ‘harnisklædte Kæmper, / Udhvilede fra Strid; […] Nu hvile deses Bene / Bag høiens Bautasteen’ (armoured giants rested / between their bloody frays […] now found in stone-set barrows, / Their final resting place) (Oehlenschläger 1823, 102). While founded on a heroic past, when Danes were brave and victorious, Oehlenschläger’s Romantic nationalist landscape is serene, the Danes inward-looking, and content to inhabit their small nation of picturesque ‘Danish islands’ surrounded by calm blue seas and lush green beech trees.

Like the British art historian Graham-Dixon, whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, with his sense of a deep connection between the natural environment and the peoples who inhabit it, Danish Romantic poets such as Oehlenschläger, the art historian Høyen and painters such as Lundbye and Skovgaard seek not merely to understand and depict nature in its own right. Instead, from their very different perspectives, they turn the natural environment into a projection of human experiences, longing, a sense of destiny and belonging often conflated, in the nineteenth century, with the rise of European nationalisms and modern urbanisation (see chapter 4 in this volume).

Transnational Landscapes and Local Idylls

By contemplating the geographic or environmental origins of a particular Nordic character from a culturally and physically elevated distance, Graham-Dixon and his Nordic nineteenth-century forebears step into the shadow of the iconic Romantic painting ‘Der Wanderer über dem
Nebelmeer’ (Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, c.1818) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). Friedrich’s wanderer is not an art critic, but instead a contemplative mountaineer leisurely posed upon a rocky precipice with his back to the viewer, gazing out on a sea of fog inclosing the mountain peaks below, demonstrating the sublime natural environment and the detached mastery of the human within it. This quintessential Romantic landscape is an imagined, idealised landscape cobbled together in the artist’s studio from detailed sketches of rock formations he had recorded from nature when travelling through the Elbe Sandstone Mountains southeast of Dresden.

Friedrich was born in Greifswald in Swedish Pomerania, a Dominion under the Swedish Crown from 1630 to 1815, situated on what is now the Baltic coast of Germany and Poland. He studied under the Danish portrait painter Jens Juel, who was one of the first landscape painters in the Nordic countries, at the renowned Copenhagen Academy of Art in 1794, before moving to Dresden. There, in 1818, he was joined by the Norwegian artist J.C. Dahl (Johan Christian Dahl, 1788–1857), often referred to as the father of Norwegian painting, who would find in Friedrich a mentor and a friend, and in Dresden a new home away from home.

Dahl’s best-known work, his monumental ‘Fra Stalheim’ (View from Stalheim, 1842), has become a Norwegian national icon for its dramatic mountain view, Dahl’s eye for realistic botanical detail and its knowledgeable depiction of Norwegian rural architecture. Painted from sketches in Dresden decades after he had last been to the village of Stalheim in Hordaland county (only about 26 km from Stegastein viewpoint), the scenery has become grander than it already was: the mountains are higher, the valley narrower, the light more dramatic and the whole view crowned by a double rainbow (see Figure 11.2). The painting is a representative of German Romanticism and a testament to its ideal that the artist does not simply record or copy nature but paints instead his own feelings – as a kind of self-portrait (Gunnarsson 1998, 94). At the same time, Dahl’s landscape painting is a central example of Nordic Romantic nationalism, as it records an idyllic, perhaps nostalgic, mood of longing for a specific landscape and the life and work of the inhabitants within it.

Paradoxically, Danish and Norwegian landscape painters, who were central to the invention of a unique national spirit connecting the people to their lands, were deeply indebted to German Romantic philosophers and painters. In Denmark the indebtedness to German culture for the fashioning of renewed national pride following defeat in the Napoleonic Wars was to take a particularly ironic turn when Denmark shrank even
further in the latter part of the century following the Schleswig wars against Prussia and the Austrian Empire in 1848–52 and 1864: following the 1864 Treaty of Vienna, Denmark was forced to concede the Duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Saxe-Lauenburg to Prussia and Austria.

However, while the political storms raged over Europe, artists and poets turned their attention inwards, to idyllic landscapes and homely peasant life – a motif that had always been part of the Romantic nationalist landscape tradition; we recall the two diminutive figures on the beach with their broken cart on Lundbye’s Danish coast and the small homesteads in Dahl’s Stalheim. A preoccupation with rural life was also central to popular Swedish painters around the turn of the century. In Anders Zorn’s (1860–1920) ‘Midsommarndans’ (Midsummer Dance, 1897), rural life and customs are depicted in the shape of dancers celebrating the evening light of a Midsummer’s Eve celebration. A desire for a simple, domestic life is also noticeable in Carl Larsson’s (1853–1919) much loved idyllic watercolours of family life in his home and garden in Sundborn in Dalarna, Sweden. When published as an internationally bestselling book with the title Ett Hem (A Home, 1899), these artworks by Carl Larsson

Figure 11.2  Johan Christian Dahl’s (1788–1857) painting ‘Fra Stalheim’ (View from Stalheim, 1842). Oil on canvas. 190 × 246 cm. Source: National Gallery of Norway.
and his wife Karin, who created much of the interior design for their home, co-created a vision of rustic, idyllic country living that came to have a great influence on twentieth-century Scandinavian design, not least on the home furnishing style of Ingvar Kamprad’s global ‘flat-pack empire’ IKEA.

It was also around 1900 that a national spirit contributed to the flourishing of art in Finland leading up to its independence from Russia in 1917. A distinct national school of painting employed motifs, well-known from their Nordic neighbours and predecessors, to create a particular Finnish landscape. One of the most renowned Finnish artists, the cosmopolitan Akseli Gallén-Kallela (1865–1931), painted expressive, unspoilt landscapes with scenes from everyday life, drawing heavily on national myth and the epic Kalevala (see chapter 3 in this volume).

Some painters, like Dahl and Gallén-Kallela, would travel far beyond the Nordic region to discover their longing for landscapes they had left behind. Some were called by the raging nationalist sentiments of the long nineteenth century to distil in shapes and paint the imagined connections between Nordic peoples and their changing national geographies and societies for political purposes. Paradoxically, ‘nature’ had to be left behind (e.g. due to urbanisation) in order to become the object of our desires and our imagination. The genre of landscape painting itself presupposes, therefore, a sense of distance between the human observer and the natural environment.

As Graham-Dixon, Friedrich, Dahl, Høyen, Oehlenschläger and Lundbye do, we are historically conditioned to perceive nature as spectators looking onto a stage, where human conflicts between sublime experiences of terror and homely comfort, between the fractures of a modern war-torn world and a Romantic nationalist promise of a healing sense of belonging, are enacted. It would, therefore, not be entirely correct to say that ‘the Scandinavian mind itself has been shaped by nature’. Instead, we could say that today’s multiple notions (foreign and domestic) of what it means to be Nordic are intricately entangled with the diverse landscapes Nordic peoples have imagined and fashioned for themselves, with significant inspiration from abroad, over the past two and a half centuries.

Nordic Nature in the Anthropocene

The nature philosopher and geologist Steffens had preached an organicist understanding of human dwelling among minerals, plants and animals,
but the natural world remained (not only in industry but also in the arts) the expression of a superior human will and imagination. However, the sense that only when we appear to have removed ourselves entirely from nature does it become an object for our longing and desire provokes a growing sense of apprehension in the twentieth century. As scientists sounded the alarm for the unsustainable human misuse of natural resources and the pollution of ecosystems, Nordic politicians, philosophers, artists and poets began to reimagine how humans could find their place among animals, stones, trees and seas on more equal organicist terms.

The Nordic countries have been successful in creating an international brand of environmental exceptionalism. In other words, the now defunct assumption that the inhabitants of the Nordic lands were deeply, and perhaps authentically, connected to their natural environments has returned in our day as a neo-Romantic xeno and autostereotype (see chapter 14 in this volume) that holds Scandinavians as somehow predisposed to mitigate climate change and instinctively driven towards appropriate environmental legislation. Despite their advanced, and by no means carbon-neutral, industrial economies, the Nordic countries are today associated with sustainable development, authentic natural environments, ecological awareness and ‘green’ energy.

This Nordic environmental brand has its own internationally renowned philosopher, mountaineer and environmental activist in the Norwegian Arne Næss (1912–2009). He was the progenitor of ecosophy (a philosophy of ecological equilibrium he introduced in the early 1970s) and ‘deep ecology’, which shares some characteristics with Romantic nature philosophy, as it sees the human as part of a wider ecosystem, but insists that all life forms have value in themselves and not simply for the value they represent to humans. In writings drawing on years spent in his cabin at Tvergastein high in the Norwegian mountains, such as those collected in The Ecology of Wisdom (2009), Næss opposed a hierarchical view of the relationship between humans and other forms of nature and presented a critique of anthropocentrism (preferring a biocentric view) as a central tenet of deep-ecological thinking.

In literature, an environmentalist critique of anthropocentric thinking and behaviour for its role in the unfolding climate crisis has taken many forms since the 1960s. In the Nordic tradition of ecopoetry, biocentric views have been given poetic form in Inger Christensen’s (1935–2009) Sommerfugledalen: Et requiem (1991, Butterfly Valley: A Requiem) with its invocation of ‘the planet’s butterflies’ soaring like ‘pigments from the warm body of the earth, / cinnabar, ochre, phosphor yellow, gold / a swarm of basic elements aloft’ (Christensen 2004, 3). In
the ‘wooded’ poetic world of the poet-lumberjack Hans Børli (1918–89),
the true owners of the Norwegian forest are not the exploitative timber
companies, but instead his own ‘people’, who ‘have never owned a tree’,
who live in biospheric symbiosis like a ‘child owns its mother’ (Børli 2007,
39–41). In Tomas Tranströmer’s (1931–2015) poem ‘Några minuter’ (‘A
Few Moments’, 1970), the poetic human consciousness finds itself deeply
intertwined with ‘another creature’, enmeshed in an ecosystem of trees
and roots: ‘The dwarf pine on marsh grounds holds its head up: a dark
rag. / But what you see is nothing compared to the roots, / the widening,
secretly groping, deathless or half- / deathless root system. // I you she
he also put roots out. / Outside our common will. / Outside the City. […]’
(Tranströmer 2018, n.p.).

The poetic pursuit of a biocentric rather than an anthropocen-
tric standpoint, where nature is not understood as a mere projection of
human experiences and activities but on its own non-human terms, has
continued into the twenty-first century with the emergence of the notion
of the Anthropocene. Aase Berg (1967–) is a Swedish poet who explores
the boundaries between the human and the non-human. Her poetry is
characterised by an eerie forewarning of how the Anthropocene human
is enmeshed in natural processes of regeneration and destruction beyond
our control, as in the poem ‘Moloss’ (‘Mastiff’) from her first collection
och bubblar i svalgen det dånar och det bryter sammam bakom oss’ (‘The
substances are fermenting, throats are corroding and bubbling, things
are rumbling and crumbling behind us’) (Berg 2009, 38–9).

The contemporary landscapes described in Digte 2014 (Poems
2014) by Danish poet Theis Ørntoft (1984–) may, as its title suggests,
lead us back to Oehlenschläger’s similarly titled collection from 1803,
but Ørntoft’s is not a Golden Age about to break through the soil into
the present. Like Berg, Ørntoft presents a post-apocalyptic world with
a much ‘darker ecology’ than the harmonic dreamscape of the deep
ecologists (Morton 2016). His is a vision of a landscape where the cli-
mate catastrophe has already happened and where the human will and
body, digital and capitalist networks, have been painfully swamped and
consumed by an avenging geological and natural environment:

der vokser planter op gennem mine underboers halse / der vokser
planter op gennem min etages gulve / men hvad vil du have jeg skal
gøre ved det, siger jeg / og kigger forvirret ud gennem mine øjne /
ud til askelandskaber der snart skal smeltes om / […] mens verden
vælter ind gennem mine fem tsunamisanser / og ødelægger alt på
sin vej / så skriger en stemme i min hals. (Ørntoft 2014, 15)
Plants grow up through my downstairs neighbours’s throats/
plants grow through the floor boards of my flat / but what do you
want me to do about it, I ask / and glare confused out of my eyes /
out into ashen landscapes soon to be melted down / […] while the
world submerges my five tsunami senses / and destroys everything
in its wake / a voice screams in my throat.)

Not merely a source for utopian narratives of a new exceptionalist Nor-
dic identity, deep history, belonging and continuity, today’s Nordic
landscapes are beset with the fear, guilt and traumas that follow anthropo-
genic climate change and the degradation of ecosystems.

The Golden Age Romantic nationalist landscapes are, however, not
simply a distant memory. Their instrumentalisation of the natural envi-
ronment emerges as a complex precondition for contemporary landscape
painting as a genre in its own right, and can, arguably, be seen as implica-
ted in idealising anthropocentric appropriations of nature, which have
taught us to gloss over destructive human interventions in the planet’s
ecology and geology.

The early history of National Romantic painting in Denmark fea-
tured painters who set out to re-imagine their sense of belonging as
layered in the ancient geology of mountains and chalk cliffs. In 2007, the
Danish painter Allan Otte painted the chalk cliffs at Stevns in ‘Indgreb’
(2007, Interference), on a canvas where the chalk factory has rele-
gated the cliffs (the emblem of a deep authentic national history) to the
periphery as mere industrial material. In a similar critical dialogue with
the Golden Age, Otte recalls Lundbye’s always sunny Romantic nation-
alist landscapes in ‘Lundbye Remake’ (2011), where industrialised
agriculture now takes centre stage with windmills in the background and
plastic-wrapped straw bales dotted over the fields. The Golden Age land-
scapes are ripe for ecological critique and in multiple, often contradicting,
ways are a constant presence in contemporary understandings, idealisa-
tions and depictions of Nordic landscapes and national identities – even
in a globalised age of the Anthropocene.

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