Crossing the Ecotone. On the Narrative Representation of Nature as ‘Wild’

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ABSTRACT
This chapter analyses some of the recurrent narrative patterns used in representing certain cultural landscapes as wild. Focusing on Scandinavia, it describes how in legal and political treatises, as well as in folk religious traditions, an otherwise familiar and subdued nature was represented as a place of mystery, both promising and dangerous. The ‘Outside’, the ‘North’, and the borderland of settlements are given as examples that helped shape the dichotomy between civilization and wilderness in contexts where local and political identities were negotiated. It is argued that ‘wilderness’ to this day is conceptualised primarily as a liminal space and thus a social category, providing a semantic vacancy for the negotiation of norms and values.

Into the Wild
Most European wildnesses changed early into cultural landscapes. Even Europe’s far north had already been accessed by the early Middle Ages, with Viking trade routes
stretching from the Polar Regions to the Middle East. In early modern times, Scandinavia was soon mapped in terms of economic resources. However, the concept of strange uncontrollable territories, hostile not only to settlement but to mankind itself, remained in place. Over the centuries, mythical representations of wild lands as a realm of spirits and sorcery loomed large in European political debates and served as a cornerstone in the construction of local identities. This chapter explores some of the narratives that have reconstrued an otherwise geographically familiar (and in many cases economically exploited) nature as a place of mystery.

First and foremost, folk legends are known to display a world shaped, populated and to a certain extent ruled by ghosts, spirits and similar ‘troll-beings’, seemingly transferring a mythical world-view to modern times. Oral traditions have classically been interpreted as providing concepts to explain and make sense of natural phenomena. However, the explanatory function becomes doubtful where the stories create larger mysteries than they are supposed to resolve. In fact, when dealing with a genre as persistent and manifold as the legends, any clear-cut function becomes doubtful.

This chapter focuses upon the Norwegian oral tradition, which was extensively collected from the early 19th century onward. In the local context, storytelling was considered an art, with specialists being the keepers of a region’s history. The stories were meant as entertainment and were subject to debate; thus they had to be told in a way that was both fascinating and credible. Far from being made up spontaneously, the stories told can be shown to follow a strict set of motifs, rules and patterns, which aimed to provoke curiosity and interest. Interpretation has to take the resulting narrative structure as well as the social setting into account. As in the study of literature, the search for the legend’s ‘historical meaning’ will always remain somewhat arbitrary. What can be done, however, is to analyse how the stories work within historical contexts and to estimate their potential effects within a given discourse.

In estimating the function and impact of the way nature is represented within the tradition, two very basic concepts will serve as a guide: the ‘Outside’ and the ‘North’. In the narrative space created within the legends, both terms denote wild lands, territories beyond human control. In the storylines, they serve as liminal spaces. Both terms, however, also had a political and legal function. They served as discrete categories in Old Norse law, where they characterised land that was uncultivated, or that had been entered without ‘cultural intentions’. From the early modern age onwards, the ‘North’ was widely used to denote those northern territories, which were seen as a last European wilderness and the final frontier to civilisation. By tracing the social impact of these concepts, it will become possible to determine their narrative function and impact more closely. As we shall see, the elements addressed by them have not changed much. Even today, our perception of the wilderness is shaped by its narrative representation as a liminal space.
THE OUTSIDE AS A LEGAL PERIPHERY

“It is an inexpiable crime to sit outside. It is an inexpiable crime to travel to the Finnmark to have one’s fortune told.” This suggestive passage from the Old Norse law of the Borgarting (around 1320) juxtaposes the northern regions of Scandinavia with some unspecified ‘outside’ as mythical places of magic. In Old Norse law, *útiseta* – ‘to sit outside’ – was considered a major crime and would inevitably lead to outlawry: the delinquent would lose his civil rights and be expelled not only from society but from mankind, as he becomes “just like a wolf.” It was forbidden to feed, shelter or protect the outlaw. As a person, he was regarded as socially dead, with his wife left a widow and his children orphans. That the cryptic formula should thus provide the legal basis for the maximum penalty, on a par with atrocities like “killing a man without reason for enmity” has puzzled researchers ever since.

“Sitting outside” was obviously an established category since it is mentioned in most of the older legal texts, often in the – equally mysterious – formula “sitting outside to wake up trolls.” The context is always one of magic, fortune-telling or pagan worship, but no details are provided. Neither is the kind of practice involved exemplified, nor do we get to know where to find this ‘outside’. The Old Norse eddas and sagas are similarly unforthcoming on this issue, but at least reconfirm the mythic character of the deed. In the eddic *Völuspá*, the seeress is ‘sitting outside’ when approached by Odin to announce her wisdom. The god himself, as is reported in the *Ynglingasaga*, “sometimes called the dead out of the earth, or set himself beside the burial-mounds”, making him “lord of the mounts.” The only goal of Odin’s quest for wisdom is to avert the final fatal destiny of the gods, just as the search for prophecies in the sagas aims at a gain of military strategic information. The saga of Hakon Herdebreid reports:

> People say that Gunhild, who was married to Simon, King Hakon’s foster-brother, let somebody sit outside all night for Hakon’s victory; and that the answer was obtained that they should fight King Inge by night, and never by day, and then the result would be favourable. Thordis Skeggia was the woman called upon, who, it is said, had been sitting outside, but I do not know if that is true.

The mythological ties and, first and foremost, the evocative phrase itself, raise speculations as to the kind of place, magic and actors that might have been involved. The historian of religion Gro Steinsland interprets *útiseta* as a specialist practice of the *völvas* (seeresses), thus a part of the *seidr*-magic prominent in the Old Norse sagas. She emphasises that this kind of magical practice did not necessarily involve extensive rituals or magical instruments; the *völva* could sit on a rock or besides a crossroad throughout night’s darkest hours and prise as many insights from nature as possible. Perhaps supernatural entities or the dead would somehow be summoned.

The regular mention of *útiseta* as a legal category in the Christian laws indicates that it was not only pagan religious specialists that could be involved with this practice.
Even in more recent folk religious traditions, the notion of “sitting outside” seemed to have been roughly understood. However, the stories remain unclear about where the outside was actually located and what was done when sitting there. In all cases, visiting it is presented as a dangerous undertaking, reported only with serious admonition. Very common in European folklore is the idea of sitting at a remote crossroads during the night, where either elves or Satan himself might come by, offering wisdom or treasures. Some Icelandic tales stress the importance of not talking to them. In Norway, the advice was to sit on three consecutive Thursdays or, alternatively, on Christmas Eve. Admittedly, the cost-benefit ratio seems rather unfavourable. The best one could hope was for one’s future spouse to be revealed.

The common denominator becomes obvious only in the stories of people leaving festivities to enter the forests by night, in many cases never to be seen again. He who did so accepted the risk of getting involved with anti-Christian powers and thus leaving the social community behind. This involved voluntarily renouncing (Christian) society. Sitting outside is, in the words of Kerstin Hastrup, “a metaphor for leaving the ordinary social space”. Rather than denoting a geographical category, the outside denotes a social borderland. It was reached anytime somebody left the cultural landscape not to travel or to cultivate new land, but as an end in itself. The harsh penalty connected to the act in Old Norse law reconfirms this: “sitting outside” leads to outlawry for life, because by doing so one has deliberately left the rule of law. The penalty acknowledges the fact that the transgressor has decided no longer to be part of human society. In common terms for outlaws, he would became a “man of the woods” or a “wild man”, a trollish kind of being. As Hastrup argues, the dichotomy of “the wild” and “the social” was formative for Old Norse society as well as, in the case of Iceland, for the early national state.

In Old Norse texts, as in the later legends, what we would call nature is represented mostly in negative terms as land that is not yet cultivated or is impossible to cultivate. Nature was perceived solely as the borderland to civilisation. This borderland was a part of the social arena, but was not a self-contained area. Where the “outside” began had to be negotiated anew in every single case, in accordance with social norms and political interests. The same goes for man: he seems to be a cultural being when integrated into society, but might anytime unveil his trollish nature. As a legal category, “outside” referred to both land and to man’s inner wilderness.

This holds, too, on a larger scale. While in Old Norse legal discourse, all peripheral uncultivated land could be declared as “outside”, the whole of northern Scandinavia (sometimes even Norway and Sweden in general) counted as an “outside” from a Middle-European perspective, as they were the borderland of Christian civilisation. During the late Middle Ages and Early Modern age, both the nature and the people of the Arctic were characterized as part of a mythical wilderness simply called “the North”.
THE NORTH AS POLITICAL PERIPHERY

Old Norse law forbade any travel to the Finnmark, if the journey was not meant for commerce but for magical purposes. The upper regions of Scandinavia were considered extraordinarily dangerous territory in the sagas due to the magical skills of their inhabitants. But it was not until early modern times that they became a mythical space in the narrower sense. Regarded as the outermost limit of possible human settlement and referred to simply as “the North”, the territory was believed to shelter evil – mainly due to and at the expense of the local inhabitants, the Sami. In 1555, the exiled archbishop of Sweden, Olaus Magnus, published his comprehensive *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* [Description of the Northern Peoples], parts of which were translated into all major European languages. He describes in detail the natural conditions and the landscape, which to him seemed inconceivably hostile to man. The sections translated, however, were mainly those dealing with witchcraft and sorcery. As Olaus elucidates, in the northern regions “wizards and magicians were found everywhere, as if it was their particular home”. Indeed the ability to survive the icy wilderness seemed in itself to be something magical. Olaus focused especially on the Sami, whose magical skills were already stereotypical at that time. They would leave their bodies while in a state of “devilish sleep”, he writes, and they would cause harm over enormous distances by the dangerous *Gand*, a magical projectile that could bring sickness and death to whoever was hit by it. Then he made a harsh association. He quoted from the Bible, especially the Book of Jeremiah, where it is stated: “Then the LORD said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land”. After discussing the matter at length, Olaus came to the conclusion that “unfortunately there can be no doubt” that the North is the “abode of Satan”. But, as he consolingly emphasized: “There is a way to heaven even from the North, from which every evil spreads.”

In the reception of Olaus’ work, even this ray of hope was ignored and his conclusions were soon generalized and widely used in political debate (for example, in propaganda campaigns during the Thirty Years’ War). Here, Swedish soldiers were depicted as in league with the devil. Already in 1580, the French jurist and political theorist Jean Bodin published his influential demonological treatise *De la démonomanie des Sorciers*, which came to serve as a witch-hunting manual for many Protestant countries. He used Norway as synonymous with “the North” and argued that in this land “far more sorcerers and warlocks could be found than in all the rest of the world”. The same was affirmed in 1597 by James VI King of Scots (the future James I of England and Ireland). To Bodin and his followers, this was not only a domestic problem for the Kingdom of Denmark, which Norway at that time was part of, but a threat to all of Europe. The information provided by Olaus that the Sami with their *Gand* could cause harm over large distances was once more combined with sayings from the Bible. In the book of Isaiah, Lucifer is placed on some “mount of congregation in the sides of the North” from where he plans to “ascend above the heights of the clouds” and “be like the most...
High”. Bodin suggested that thus the icy north wind transports the *diabolus gandus*, as it was called in church Latin – the evil spells of the Sami – with which witchcraft and despair entered central Europe (where the early modern climate shift known as the Little Ice Age had reached its peak)\(^{28}\). As the historian Rune B. Hagen has shown, in the early 17th century, these external pressures drove the Danish administration to react and they encouraged extensive witch trials in Norway, especially in the furthest province, the Finnmark. It soon became the area of the most intense witch hunts in Europe. During the trials of 1660, even Isaiah’s mount of congregation was identified: it was the hill of Domen, close to Vardø, where the entrance to hell could be found\(^{29}\).

The portrayal of the North as a region of natural and human wilderness served political interests. For central European countries, it suggested that their domestic problems had an external cause. For 17th-century Denmark, it underpinned the need for increased government access to the Finnmark, where the borders were heavily disputed between Denmark, Sweden and Russia\(^{30}\).

In Norway itself, the clear-cut notion of the North as an enclosed space was well known, too, but of course it did not designate the whole country. According to later local legends, the mythical territory was defined by natural rather than political lines of demarcation. The two largest glaciers of Norway separated the territory into three areas, each of which had different mythical connotations in the oral tradition. Just north of Europe’s biggest inland glacier, the Jostedals glacier between Bergen and Trondheim, and the adjacent Dovre mountain-chain, there began the area of Sami settlements. Given the constant conflicts between the Norwegian and the Sami population, this large area appeared in southern Norwegian folk tradition as a borderland, in a constant struggle between the Christian faith and encroaching demonic forces\(^{31}\). From the middle Norwegian perspective, of course, the real “North” began only with the Svartisen glacier. A well-known legend explains how this came into being. According to legend, Saint Olaf, King of Norway from 1015 to 1028, travelled northward to Christianize the country. The Sami would not tolerate this under any circumstances, and therefore sent a *Gand*. It caused a terrible blizzard, a storm so powerful that none like it had ever been seen before or since. From the mountains to the sea a gigantic wall of ice arose: the Svartisen glacier. The Sami thought that no living being would ever be able to pass through. Saint Olaf understood that this was no natural power but sorcery, and with his horse he dashed onwards, reached the remaining small space between the glacier and the sea just in time to erect a cross. Instantly, the storm ceased. Although Saint Olaf had saved the day, the final border was now established, with only a small crossing left out, allowing Christianity to spread north and the demonic forces to intrude into the south\(^{32}\).

In the legend, Saint Olaf works as a symbol for the development of the Norwegian settlement. The idea that the North isolated itself as a realm of pagan people and demonic powers, however, is in fact grounded in the observation of nature. The Jostedals glacier is only 2,500 years old and until the 17th century was growing constantly. The Svartisen
glacier is much older, but seems to have increased in size considerably during the Little Ice Age between the 13th and 18th centuries\textsuperscript{33}. So, as more and more passageways used by former generations were lost, the idea of a separate ungodly territory was apparently confirmed.

The collections of Norwegian oral traditions show that the further north one goes, the more differentiated the local legends get. While in southern regions the Sami appeared as a closed group, with every individual interchangeably demonic and powerful, in the northern regions it was the \textit{Noaidi}, the Sami shamans, who were dangerous\textsuperscript{34}. They would live in the very peripheral regions that were impossible to cultivate. Their status as social outsiders meant that these regions constituted an “outside”.

**The Periphery in the Legends**

In the oral tradition of Norway, both the “North” and the “Outside” can be found as terms for peripheral zones. The so-called ‘nature legends’ or ‘mythical legends’ present a world inhabited by ghosts and spirits. Outside the familiar space, both the territories and its inhabitants manifest themselves as “wild” or, more precisely, \textit{trollish}. The word \textit{troll} as used in the legends collected during the 19th and early 20th century is not to be confused with the present-day image of ugly hairy creatures. Admittedly, these fantastic characters have their predecessors in the folk tradition, but their present shape derives from the late 19th century works of National Romantic painters (especially T. Kittelsen) and folklorists (especially P. Chr. Asbjørnsen and J. Moe). In the more authentic legends (as well as in the Old Norse sagas and probably in Old Norse law), the term \textit{troll} denotes not a species of supernatural entities but otherness in general\textsuperscript{35}. It is used to describe everything beyond human control and everything opposed to humanity. It is a label put on the dark side of the wilderness. We find lakes said to be \textit{troll}-lakes, as they may virtually hunt the people passing by; we hear about \textit{troll}-birds that cannot be shot; even \textit{troll}-books that take control of their owners; and we encounter people with magical abilities that might be “more \textit{troll} than human”\textsuperscript{36}. At least from a southern Norwegian perspective, the indigenous Sami people of northern Norway counted as \textit{troll}.

Legends about people travelling ‘North’ to learn sorcery were quite common. Several locally-known sorcerers (\textit{troll}-men) are reported to have returned from this dangerous journey with magical abilities and somewhat alienated from the society they had left behind. In the wild, they had become \textit{troll}.

The same could happen to anyone who entered the outside that began right at people’s doorstep\textsuperscript{37}. There the Hidden People (\textit{huldrefolk}) dwelled, the most common type of supernatural entities, known by various names and all over the country. They are portrayed as living in small communities in the hills and mountains, as did their ancestors, the \textit{vettir} and elves of the Old Norse literature. In general, their form of organisation seems to mirror that of rural societies, but very little detail is provided within the leg-
ends. It is a narrative requirement that the legends be told from the perspective of society. A protagonist may encounter the Hidden People, which was a dangerous event. He might be lured by their extraordinary beauty and follow them to their abode. But as soon as he gained an insight into their life he was lost to society. He would either return alienated, unable to utter a meaningful word and long to go back to the Hidden People, or he would stay and become one of them. The Hidden People’s appearance is humanlike, and they are the undisputed rulers of the wilderness. They might suddenly appear (the legends report) to someone that had gone into the forests to cut lumber or collect moss:

Suddenly a strange woman stood beside them. She was dressed in a peculiar way. Where she came from they did not know. It was as if she had emerged out of the ground. “You should not harvest here, this is my pasture you are taking,” she said. [...] “If you continue, it will do you no good. You are warned now. Do as you wish, but you know what will happen.” “We do not know you.” “Ah, I live here beside you,” she said, “me and my people dwell in these hills.” Now they understood what kind of woman she was. Nobody dared to take the moss.

The folklorist Olav Christensen argues that man has three basic forms of orientation towards nature. He may conceive of himself as ruling nature, as part of nature or as subject to nature’s overpowering and uncompromising force. According to Christensen, the oral tradition mostly depicts the latter, which offers insight into a time when everyday life still had to be organized in accordance with natural conditions. However, although the legends clearly reflect man’s dependency on and exposure to nature, it does not necessarily follow that the legends would essentially describe nature. The Classic school of folklore studies saw mythical legends as literal pre-scientific explanations of natural phenomena: legends of ghosts might be inspired by people seeing ground fog; the wild hunt (a host of ghostly riders dashing through the skies at night) was but a misapprehension of storm winds. Many legends emphasise that encounters would happen in dark uncanny places or on stormy nights and could thus be interpreted in this way. Certainly, in some individual cases, the experience of nature’s energy and peculiarities would have reinforced these mythical motifs. But, with regard to the oral traditions that overlaid the local history with dozens of stories, the idea of legends as interpretations of natural phenomena is utterly wrong.

Oral traditions are local traditions; they depict an environment that was entirely familiar to the narrators and their audience. Knowing the details of a landscape with a specificity far greater than documented in the written sources was essential to the rural population. As the folklorist Ørnulf Hodne observes: “The most detailed map does not depict the whole toponomy of a region. Those who are really familiar with the treasure of names in a Norwegian borough will know that there is hardly a boulder, an old tree, a small rill, mound, or patch of land which is or was not called by some name.” By telling the stories connected to them, local history is preserved and local identity is created. The reports about the old trees where once the Hidden People received their offerings,
the mountain pastures that were invaded by them, the swamps they lured people into, made history local and nature meaningful – by attaching social information to it.

It is the narrative dichotomy between the familiar society and an unknown natural realm that characterizes the mythical legends of the oral tradition. Hodne speaks of two spheres of activity or mythical territories similar to the Midgard and the Utgard of Old Norse mythology. On the one side, there is the cultivated territory, where man has a certain amount of control. On the other side, there is the wilderness, barely accessible and inhabited by wild animals and all sorts of troll-beings. Only the cultural landscape is beautiful and is described in detail; the wilderness is only mentioned as uncanny. If we look at how nature is represented in these narratives, what is addressed explicitly is not so much nature in general but ecotones.

In biology, the term ecotone denotes the tension between two ecologies, either in the form of a regional transition zone between two types of vegetation or as a more clear-cut line between, for example, fields and woods. In both cases, it is an area with a distinct flora and fauna. Ecotones are mentioned frequently in the legends, as they serve as a liminal space. Entering the ecotone was a legitimate way of interacting with the Hidden People.

Making food offerings to the Hidden People on holidays was a widespread custom throughout the centuries. It was meant as a sign of respect and of the hope that peaceful neighbourly relations might be maintained. Porridge and drinks were placed under old trees that were considered to be the abode of the hidden ones, or at the edge of the farmyard. These areas demarcated the borders to the outside. The trees were placed on mounts that should not be set foot on for other reasons than to pay one’s respects. If they were damaged, despair would follow. Peasants who refrained from leaving offerings are the protagonists of many legends. Not finding their tribute placed in the borderland, the Hidden People might invade the farm. They could cause sickness and despair, in some cases wipe out whole families. In contrast, regular high-quality donations would help to establish a friendly relationship. In the legends, a rich harvest, healthy cattle and prosperity are ascribed to a good relationship with the Hidden People, who would provide unseen help if needed.

Another example of legitimate interaction took place in mountain pastures. Unlike the open field/ecotone/closed forest structure of the lowlands, mountain pastures with their narrow strips of grazing grounds constitute an ecotone in themselves. Neither fully cultivated nor totally wild, this is a kind of no-man’s-land within the narrative space of the legends. They are legitimately used by the rural population during the summer months, but in wintertime the Hidden People would take over. When the herdsmen approached it in springtime, they were encouraged to warn the Hidden People of their coming. When autumn came, they would have to leave in time. A frequent motif involves a boy that hides in a hut to see if the rumours come true; the adventure that fol-
lows rarely turns out well. Besides such daredevilry, a certain amount of interaction was inevitable. A collector of legends from Gudbrandsdal sums up: “There is presumably no mountain pasture in Gudbrandsdal without Hidden People-stories told about it.”

In the legends, natural environments are mostly represented by referring to the ecotones. These ecotones are the areas that demarcate and organize the local society’s territories by delimiting them from those that did not belong to it. Where human traits were attributed to nature, one could communicate not only with it but about it. The type of stories introduced so far thus can be read as representations of the local community’s environmental identity. They do not stand alone but are an element in the wider discourse on local and individual identities which constitutes the oral traditions.

The next step is to look at those stories, which are the building blocks of these traditions. In the stories, as in real life, demarcation lines become interesting only when they are crossed. And indeed the crossing of ecotones (stories about people who accidentally or on purpose left the haven of society) brings the narrative traditions to life. The ‘adventures’ (eventyr) – the modern Norwegian term for fairy tale – of local individuals that cross the lines form the most elaborate and popular stories within the local traditions. These people serve as the protagonists for the legends’ extensive background of an antagonistic nature.

**Crossing the Ecotone**

If the legends were meant to illustrate a natural order, they set a bad example. In the stories, borderlines are crossed, in every direction, in every possible way. Forces from the outside invade the cultural space; people leave it either deliberately or by force; cunning folk try to mediate between the realms or play them off against each other. The most common motifs are accounts of people who, either for a short time or for the rest of their lives, were taken into the mountain (bergtatt).

An elderly shepherdess once tended the goats on the mountain pasture close to Segelstad. She was rather simple-minded, could not read and was in general not fit for much. She ran after her goats all day long. One evening the goats came home alone and some people were sent out to search for her in spite of the heavy rain. Three days they looked for her and finally they found her in a marsh deep in the mountain range. It was pouring with rain and everyone in the search party was soaked, but the shepherdess had remained completely dry. She was confused and acted strangely, and did not speak a word. After she was brought back to the pasture they questioned her and she finally found her tongue, although she just answered that she was not allowed to tell anything. She had promised it to those she had been with.

The state she is in is a typical consequence of an encounter with Hidden People. People become alienated. “She was never the same again after having dealings with the Hidden People” is a common concluding sentence. As William Craigie reports on Danish elf-legends: “Those who once been with them are never right in their minds after it, and always wish to go back again.”
The most dangerous time for a human to be taken by the Hidden People was between confirmation and marriage. It is the age when the path of life has to be found. Uncertainty about the path to be taken is mirrored in many legends. A young girl Helga once heard a peculiar sound from the oak tree [the place for offerings to the Hidden People] and in this tone there was something tempting that irresistibly attracted her away from the house and to the oak. There she saw a man, dressed in the traditional costume of the village with a harp in his hand, leaning against the trunk of the tree. He left the oak and crossed the farmyard up to the wild moorland. As if enchanted, Helga followed and neither the forest, nor marsh, swamps nor the summer night’s shadows could put her off. Her unknown guide did not stop until they came to a mountain high up in the heathland. Here they both vanished, the gleeman and Helga.

The legend goes on to describe how the community gathered and tried to get Helga out by ringing the church bells. The Christian faith manifest in the act, however, fails frequently in the oral tradition. The bell rope breaks and Helga is lost. Sometimes, the story concludes, she can be heard crying within the mountain.

Despite that, being taken in – and that is crucial in the tradition – is not necessarily a bitter fate. Many legends report quite the contrary. In one example, a fight between some peasants is reported, arguing about whether or not the Hidden People really exist. The sceptic is dared to spend a night sitting outside at a crossroads so he will learn. And in fact he does. A host of riders approaches during the night, and in midst of them a girl he knows. She had been taken in some years ago. For her, too, the church bells were rung, but not long enough:

It was good they stopped ringing. When they did, I’d come all the way down by the fence at Ljöseng [the name of her farm]. If they’d kept it up just a little longer, I would have come home, but then I would not have had a day’s good health since. Now I’m Tostein’s woman and live as well as if it were Christmas all the time!

Life in the mountain can be “much better than among Christian folks”, and some would not change places at any price. The collections of legends indicate, that many young people dreamed of being taken into the mountain, as to them it meant the promise of a better life.

**Nature and Narrative**

The ecotones serve as a spatial distinction of social realms. One is the familiar living space of the traditional community; the other is qualified only by its otherness. It is still a social space, but judged neither good nor bad, and presented highly ambivalently.

In narrative terms, otherness is constructed by giving almost no clues as to the intentions, motivations or the way of life of those who dwell there. It is a basic narrative rule, which holds true for the oral traditions examined: the thoughts and motivations of the
Hidden People are not revealed. The same goes for those they had contact with. Stories of people being taken in will end at the mountain with the protagonists vanishing. Sometimes they might come out again, but they never report in detail what happened. Instead, the ones taken in will be depicted as silent and alienated. Although the narrators do not hesitate to give accounts of people’s thoughts and feelings as long as they belong to the community, it seems impossible to read the minds of those who had become involved with the Hidden People. The same goes for characters who have undertaken journeys to the north and came back as sorcerers. First, they were full of thoughts and intentions. Later, they became as mysterious as the place they visited.

In terms of aesthetic response theory, the social realm of the wild lands remains a blank, a semantic vacancy. This blank is crafted deliberately and integrated into the text in a structured way to make it work: something is shown (an abduction, a sighting of the Hidden People, the peculiar behaviour of someone who had encountered them) but never explained. According to literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, this kind of semantic vacancy can be seen as an “invitation to participate” in the story. The narrative indetermination of the “outside” is crucial, as it allows the legends to be something talked about and debated. The motifs were transmitted during centuries. Their blanks allow the listeners to become involved again and again.

The oral tradition neither explains nature nor give rules for dealing with it. Instead, it presents conflicting experiences and positions without judging them. Where a large corpus of legends from a single region is preserved, the same motif can be found told by a sceptic (in Norway, many legends were collected by priests), a believer, an admirer of the Hidden People or an enemy. For some people, the wild lands counted as an anti-social and anti-Christian realm, while for others they were a place of hope. As they are built on semantic vacancies, the legends allow both interpretations. They are in no way static, but part of an ongoing discourse, where norms and values are negotiated.

It is a somewhat new phenomenon to refer to nature with the contemporary meaning of “natural environment” or “wilderness”. Its connotations in modern discourse were shaped less by ecology or biology than by technical progress and industrialisation. The wilderness has for a long time been perceived as the borderland of civilisation. It was filled with hazards, but at the same time a space of projection for values not commonly shared, alternative conceptions of life, and possibilities that lay outside of the local community one was born into. As industrialisation and technical progress dampened the hazards of nature, these aspects became more and more predominant in the perception of natural environments.

During the Romantic period, nature finally became a place of introspection and serenity, where man could step out of his everyday life and reflect on his social and individual being. In National Romanticism, this idea was transferred from the individual to nations. Norway, for example, has been construed as a specific nation with frequent references to its allegedly specific wilderness, which encompasses all elements ranging...
from the mythical outside to the hostile north and the promise of a home deep in the woods\textsuperscript{38}. The fact that natural environments are mostly cultural landscapes, which may even have been deliberately moulded, as has been the case in Europe for centuries, is irrelevant for our stories. That is because the motif of the wild and untamed in them refers not so much to \textit{physical} as to \textit{human} nature.

\section*{Notes}
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2 At this time, a separate text genre, called \textit{beskrivelser} (reports), gave detailed accounts of the region’s human and natural resources. The first of these reports on Norway was Peder Claussøn Friis’ \textit{Norges Beskrivelse} from 1613.

3 A large corpus of legends is accessible in representative collections, of which the most significant is the \textit{Norsk Folkeminnesammling} at the University of Oslo. Large parts are published within the \textit{Norsk Folkeminnelags Skrifter}. They underlie this chapter.

4 Cf. O. Bo, R. Grambo, Ø. Hodne, Norske Segner, Oslo 1995, pp. 11-60.


7 \textit{Þæt er ubota værk at sitia utí. Þæt er ubota værk at gera finfarar. Fara at spyria spa.} The older Borngartingslov (Kristenrett), I.16. In the alternative manuscript it is phrased \textit{fara a finmork}: “...to travel to the Finnmark”, i.e. the northern provinces. Cf. R. Keyser, P.A. Munch, \textit{Norges gamle love indtil 1387}, Christiania 1846. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


10 For example in the \textit{Law of Gulating}, c. 32.


12 According to the register to Keyser, Munch, \textit{Love} cit., the formula is given 6 times in its full form “sitting outside to wake up trolls”, 2 times just as “sitting outside”.


14 \textit{Heimskringla: Ynglingasaga}, c. 7. However, worship at graves and spirit mounts seems to have been a separate category in Old Norse law. For example, the Law of Gulating gives a clear distinction between offerings to pagan gods or mounts (\textit{heidne vette}, \textit{heidne gud eller til haugar eller horgar}) (c. 29) and “murder and sorcery and sitting outside” (c. 31).

15 \textit{Heimskringla: Sagan af Hákoní herðibreið}, c. 16.

In the case of the Norwegian Landsloven, the law against "sitting outside to wake up trolls" (Landsloven IV.4.) remained in force until 1604, cf. R. Meißner (ed.), Landsrecht des Königs Magnus Hakonarson, Weimar 1941, pp. 94ff.

There is a remarkable survey by the folklorist Richard Bergh, who himself claims to have sat outside (at a crossroad) at Christmas time in 1985. His advice is to take warm clothes and watch out for traffic. Cf. O. Søras, R. Bergh, Møte med det gætfulde – Underlege opplevninger fortalte til NRK Møre of Romsdal, Oslo 1998, p. 13ff.


For example, E. Grimstad, Etter Gamalt. Folkeminne frå Gudbrandsdalen I, Oslo 1945, p. 25.


K. Hastrup, Island of Anthropology. Studies in Past and Present Iceland, Odense 1990. Hastrup interprets the eddic cosmography in this sense, with Utgard (=outside of settlement) and Midgard (=in midst the settlement) being the classification for wild and cultivated regions.

For example, the Historia Norvergiae of the 12th century gave lengthy reports on shamanistic séances.


J. Bodin, Vom ausgelausnen wütigen Teuffelsheer (De la démonomanie des sorciers 1580), Graz 1973, p. 114.


For example, in D. Blix, Draugen skreik. Tradisjon frå Lofoten, Oslo 1965, p. 85. The area around the Engabreen outlet of the Svartisen glacier might be meant.


Nature Spirits and Sami are widely interchangeable in their narrative function. Most of the legend motifs found about Hidden People were told about the Sami as well. Cf. Mathisen, forskjell cit.

O. Nordbø, Segner of Sogur frå Bøverad, Oslo 1945, p. 41.

This school started with the Brothers Grimm, L. Laistner was its leading exponent. Cf. L. Petzold, _Einführung in die Sagenforschung_, Konstanz 2002. This idea of legends as an interpretation of nature dates back to the predecessors of folklore studies in Protestant theology. From the 17th century onward, several clerics had begun to take a closer look at what they called “folk belief”. The pietistic movement with its emphasis on inwardness and the need for inner realisation of the Christian faith had first encountered the belief in ghosts and nature spirits as an obstacle on the way to God. To them, most people seemed more like “baptized pagans” than Christians, as they seemed to talk about nature as a realm of demonic forces than as God’s creation. With the influence of the Enlightenment on 18th-century churches, several attempts were undertaken to inform the public that nature spirits and similar “laughable superstitions” were in no way necessary. God’s creation was perfectly understandable in solely natural terms. Cf. A.B. Amundsen, _Mellom inderlighet og fornuft_, in Id. (ed.), _Norges Religionshistorie_, Oslo 2005, pp. 243-294.


S. Solberg, _Norsk sætertradisjon_, Oslo 1952.

Hodne, _Midgard_ cit., p. 28.

E. Grimstad, _Etter gamalt. Folkeminne frå Gudbrandsdalen II_, Oslo 1948, p. 36.

Cf. Christensen, _Landskapet_ cit., p. 238.


R. Christiansen, _Folktales of Norway_, Chicago 1964, pp. 77ff.


Christensen, _Landskapet_ cit., pp. 230ff.

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