

Aurora borealis

”I’ve seen the Northern Lights”.

The painter says this only at dinner, and only between the main course and the dessert. The good ship “Finnmarken” has left Tromsø and is travelling through the black Grøtsundet towards Skervøij. The painter says this abruptly. Before, he was telling about the sleigh dogs and the cold and the rapid gliding over the snow fields that afternoon which had already turned into night.

“I’ve seen the Northern Lights. They were suddenly there!”

To describe that? The painter needs to use his hands. He sweeps with the flat of his outstretched right palm directly through the air, and from this imaginary horizontal movement he lets streaks flow down, changes them, cuts them, pulls them to the right and to the left. The words which he picks out don’t help very much: shine – greenish-white – moving – changing – over half the heavens and down to the horizon, thirty minutes long. He is going to paint the northern lights. No, perhaps rather paint them on the foil of experience, and then perhaps a picture will emerge in which the lights are contained, but no longer visible.

Perhaps the northern lights don’t allow themselves to be described in words or to be painted in a picture. The lights are only the lights in the dark, under the starry heaven, in the cold, in the wind. The lights are only the lights after waiting for what one has never yet seen, or after asking the unanswered question, what is the reason for that palish spot on the lightly-clouded sky yonder, or for that sallow sort of lambency over there? Can the lights possibly manage to shimmer through thin mist, or is something rather making a fool of us? But what then?

Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) drew the northern lights. He knew the polar nights and the long dark winters. He had had time to think about it. A man in the thick clothing of a polar explorer, Nansen himself indeed, is lumbering over the snow. Over the scenery, there arches an infinite star-filled heaven, above which a high rambling bridge, formed out of three pale orbits, sweeps across. We see the man from behind, how he strides towards the distant horizon, exactly towards the spot where the light bridge meets the white landscape. A bridge? Rather the notion of a bridge; perhaps a memory of a glowing curtain or of a signpost protracted over the whole of the heavens pointing at infinity. It is Nansen’s drawing, published in his work “Nord I Tåkeheimen” in Kristiana, present-day Oslo, in 1911 - a popular writ in contrast to his usual scientific writing. It depicts the northern lights as a great gesture of the heavens, as the guiding light of life. It is a symbolic depiction - although Nansen was no artist but an accurate scientist – and at the same time an outstanding observer. His drawing of the “Viking”, the sealer, with which he journeyed for the first time into the northern Arctic Sea at the age of 21, proves this. It is exact but tame. The northern lights drawing is better. It is stiff and imprecise but all the more visionary.

However, to depict the northern lights in such a way as to make the viewer believe he is verily experiencing them, that Nansen himself was unable to achieve. Even others before him were hardly successful. I am not thinking of the central European woodcuts of the 16th and 17th

centuries that portray inexplicable and ghostly phenomena in the heavens as curiosities or as harbingers of some future doom, but of those graphic works resulting from the northern lights expeditions of the 19th century. The French physicist Auguste Bravais (1811-1863) led an expedition to Bossekop in the Finnmark in 1838. The artist Louis Bevalais was a member of the group. Since photography, in its infancy, was as yet unable to deal with the northern lights, he was commissioned to record the heavenly phenomenon in the traditional way. Bevalais drew what he saw, with clammy fingers, and once back in France, processed his sketches into prints. His northern lights look like a huge light-green curtain billowing in the wind. The title of his lithographs runs : »Apparence de l'Aurore Boréale dans le Nord-Est à Bossekop (Finnmark)». They are pictures of an expedition that document the lively scientific interest of the client and of the artist. Whether modern viewers believe that these pictures really do show the northern lights as such? The lithographs of the Dane Harald Moltke (1871-1960), who similarly accompanied a polar lights expedition to Finland and Iceland around 1900 as a reporter, come much closer to the visual experience. And yet, are these pale snaky lines above a church in Finland really the authentic northern lights? Or are they not perhaps, as with Nansen, symbolic depictions pushing through: the tiny church in a solitary landscape, yoked under the great breath of the All?

The postcards available on the “Finnmarken” and in all those souvenir shops in North Norway do not show the real northern lights as such to those back at home, but rather as how one might possibly imagine them to look like. Better still, they show which northern lights depiction best serves the tourist industry. Those travellers who have lived the authentic experience perceive the postcards as maculations.

Certainly not all photographs are maculations by far! The first-known published photo of the Aurora Borealis comes from Martin Brendel and appeared in Bossekop in 1892. It shows a sallowish flame standing vertically on a dark starry sky, in plain, chaste, black and white. Today there are more spectacular, even breathtaking pictures, full of colour. But the early photo, 100 years after its emergence, still impresses. In those days there were no possibilities of manipulation on the screen. The photo is plainly honest, renounces decorative appendages and claims no other secondary motives.

”Perhaps the lights will come again,” says the artist after dinner.

There is no moon in the clear and cloudless sky. There are hardly any villages bordering the Grøtsundet, so there are no disturbing sources of light. Forward, the bows of the “Finnmarken” lie in darkness. The one and only lit cabin window and the red and green position lights left and right of the bridge do not impair the view.

Those the lights? We are not sure! That brightness over there – perhaps?

Or is it just the reverberation of the settlement in the next bay of the fjord? Or even – that’s also possible – a brightish cloud? “In any case, last time, it was quite different,” says the artist.

He says this in fact just as a broad and light-green arc draws over the skies: not in the distance on the horizon, but high above our heads. On the left, his outline is sharply sketched against the background of the night. On the right, all seems to fray away. The northern lights

doubtless, but hardly spectacular.

The following day, we learn that at two in the morning, the heavenly spectacle had lasted all of forty minutes. A constant movement of light. Several passengers had been awoken. The bridge always notifies the reception staff, as soon as the lights appear, and the staff wakes the passengers. We hadn't entered our names on the list. We hadn't known about it.

To see the northern lights is a matter of luck. Clear weather, little moon, no town lights nor glow from larger urban areas, are the basic conditions.

What we see in the sky, stars, sun, moon, is abiding, recurrent, predictable. But not so the northern lights. We only know the approximate time: winter and at night. And we know the place. It is the belt that stretches around the magnetic North Pole at a distance of some 2500 km. But there is no warning. Its durability is indeterminate. It is subject to movements that the layman cannot anticipate. Not just so casually did our Norwegian acquaintance write on her map "I hope they see the northern lights!"

She herself did not see them, even though she journeyed to Tromsø specially for that purpose.

In Nordic folktales, the northern lights are gladly associated with waving maidens. With dead maidens, of course. They are greeting the living. The Inuits in Greenland think of stillborn children when they perceive the lights. The deliberations of the Lapps bring in an element of joviality: "Maidens, maidens, springing around the fire, dragging their pants behind them," they sing. The Japanese, who travel so specially to North Norway to see the lights, are guaranteed a better future if they see them! Children begotten under the lights are supposed to be endowed with riches and beauty in life. One not only needs luck to see them but they are themselves harbingers of luck, even though they were held to announce war and catastrophe to the human kind well into modern times. Mystics have been speculating over the phenomenon not only since esoteric arts have become a fashionable substitute for religion in Central Europe. The giant, declamatory poem "The Northern Lights" by the emphatic Theodore Däubler (1876-1934), in over 20,000 lines, speaks volumes. Däubler himself had never seen the Aurora Borealis. Is it remarkable that Rudolf Steiner should have expressed himself on the lights? At least, several of his pronouncements are generally interpreted as referring to them.

Adalbert Stifter, in his short story "Bergkristall", gives a short but precise description of the lights. This has nothing to do with esoterics, but much rather with accuracy of observation and with the sharp transfer of the event into language. Neither Stifter nor Steiner had ever journeyed to a zone where the northern lights are a constant escort of the traveller. On the other hand, Stifter, who studied astronomy and the natural sciences intensively, certainly had access to writings increasingly describing the phenomenon scientifically, writings of the Enlightenment and above all of the 19th century, especially those of Alexander von Humboldt. The northern lights that were visible in large areas of Europe in March 1716 and January 1831 certainly fired the imagination of the scientists.

Adalbert Stifter's text passage is valuable. It is to be found in the appendix to his essay, together with a short extract from Däubler's "Das Nordlicht". Däubler's epic, by the way, is by no means the only paean dedicated to the phenomenon. Another is the northern lights Ode

by the Russian universal genius of the 18th century, Mikhail Vasilievich Lomonosov (1711-65), whose title runs: “Evening Reflections on the Grandeur of God on Observing the Great Lights of the North.” It was already available in German translation by the middle of the 19th century.

At the Reception desk of the “Finmarken”, we get our names added to the list of those wishing to be woken up for the lights. Well, that remained to be seen if it worked. The telephone, however, was not destined to get us out of bed that night, for the bridge was to announce the northern lights at nine o’clock that evening, and one of the passengers propping up the bar was to exclaim: “No, I’m not going up to deck 5: I’ve already seen more beautiful northern lights than that!” The passenger is over 85 and had been five times already to the North Cape!

In the morning next-but-one at breakfast, I exclaim: “I’ve seen them, in front of Berlevåg, between nine and ten last night.”

I saw a green glimmer through the porthole and went up to deck 5 and along to the bows. I hadn’t fetched him, the painter, for fear of losing the sight myself. You never know when they are going to collapse. I had no idea they were going to last for fifty minutes.

What did they look like? It’s my turn now to pick out words. Greenish-white. They hauled across over half the heavens. You could see them from starboard to port, and they were so light that they reflected in the sea like the moon. They hovered so remarkably in the sky that the stars twinkled through them. They were in constant movement, briskly like flames then tranquil and unhurried, forming giant heavenly spirals, encircling and embedding portions of the sky, rippling down like the sparks of fireworks at the Seenachtsfest, the festival on the lake, bright above all, and living, and just like all living things: beyond the description of words. The northern lights are not just an optical experience but a totally embracing one: the icy wind on the bows, the slippery deck, the cradling of the ship, the rush of the waters which the bows continue to divide. Some travellers from Australia also form part, admiring the one and the same sky.

In the memories of the northern lights, all these elements will fuse together. We were to see them again later, for a last time, between Stramsund and Bodø. The artist is painting them already, and distending the wet sheets over the cabin. It is not the pencil drawing, nor acryl, but watercolours that adapt themselves to retain the flow of light and its spirals. But are these really in fact the northern lights that the sheets claim to portray?

We may ask: are there further paintings that record the northern lights, expedition photos, specialised book illustrations? I have come across very few indeed. Even in the Oslo National Museum, I only discover something in the slightly dusty rooms of the second floor. Apart from many cloud studies by Johan Christian Dahl (1788-1856), I stumble across one single tiny painting of Peder Balke, called “The Northern Lights”: spontaneous, with pushing vitality. I imagine that Balke, sitting in a vacillating boat on the night seas, pulls out his brushes and tubes, mostly white and black, and frenzily paints what he sees and what was quickly disintegrating into the nothingness of the dark. The picture is a fleeting, and at the same time intense, diary portrayal of an experience.

Peder Balke was born on Helgøy, a small island north of Tromsø, in 1804. He studied painting in Stockholm and in travelled to North Norway in 1832. In the 1840s he went to Paris, for he had heard that the young Prince Louis Philippe had visited the North Cape full of enthusiasm in 1795, and that he was still swooning over North Norway. Louis Philippe did indeed buy some of his paintings and gave him further commissions. The Oslo National Gallery owns a further small polar-light painting of Balkes: this one with four rowers in the foreground. There is a third depiction in a private collection in Oslo. Per Kirkeby, painter and author, shows all three in his book on Balke. The National Gallery does possess some further works of Balke: northern landscapes of fantasy as are also be found in the museums of Trondheim and Tromsø; a dramatically painted North Cape; a lighthouse under threatening clouds. Remarkably enough, several are reminiscent of the Japanese way. Some time later, incidentally, the Oslo National Gallery was to expose two Balke northern lights sketches on the main floor collection, as if the curators had suddenly changed their minds about their value.

I am unable to find any further northern lights pictures in the whole of the Oslo National Gallery. Nor in the Rasmus-Meyer-Samling in Bergen, with its well-documented collection of Norwegian art. Was then the Aurora Borealis of no interest to painters of the 19th century or later? Did those artists educated in the Academies of Europe so concentrate on the slippery superficialities of salon painting that they did not wish to know about the cold north and its wan polar lights? Or is it that they hardly dared to attempt that which is hardly evocable? Not even Dahl, not even the celebrated Hans Gude, who, as a Norwegian, taught in Düsseldorf, Karlsruhe, and later Berlin. Not even Münch, who often painted the sunlight of the long northern summer days. Not even Lars Hertevig, the mad artist who was Gudes' pupil in Düsseldorf, but who with his sensitive and seismographic painting by far surpassed his master, and who died in a South Norwegian fishing village in 1902 where he had been born seventy-two years earlier. The Norwegian author and playwright, Jon Fosse, set him up an impressive literary monument in his novel "Melancholia" (1995), but in its breathlessness and manic repetitive drive, it is difficult to read. Yet there indeed, light, in all its multiple refractions of the colour scale, plays a crucial role.

Is it possible, almost 200 years after Balke's small but highly precious sketch, to paint the northern lights again, to paint them even better? I ask the artist. He responds to the line of attack. "Why not? He was Peder Balke and I am Franz Bucher!"

Niklaus Oberholzer