

Acting as a Never Visited Country's Promoter, Friend, Patient, Competitor *Erlend Loe's Fakta om Finland (2001)*

Davide Finco

When a Place Develops Into a Character

The characterization of a place in literature, especially if one does not have a direct experience of it, is often based on a series of stereotypes or second-hand information, with which one eventually tries to compose a consistent image, whenever one is asked to provide it. Places are usually backgrounds for the main action and main characters of a novel or a tale, even though occasionally they may turn into the focus of the story or, at least, have the status of an implicit observer, which can interact with the other figures. The construction of place, here meant as the literary representation of existing places, is necessarily functional to the plot, but at the same time it can hardly do without several factual and known elements, so that a place is adapted to the author's purpose, but never totally replaced or recombined, unless the author wants to offer a fantastical transfiguration. As the usually inert part of the story, any place bears both signs of people who have lived there or changed it, and a natural aspect, sometimes with typical features. These basic considerations already highlight the condition of space as both a given, a shaped, and an imagined element, or, better, a nearly inextricable net of both natural and cultural elements.

Due to its hints at the representation of space, and to the peculiar role that places can play in human life, Erlend Loe's novel *Fakta om Finland* may be taken as a meaningful case study to observe what

different connections can be established between people and space and to what extent spatial reality can be mixed with (and slide into) very personal speculations. In this work, the use of real space concerns not only Finland, which is obviously the main subject, but also—though to a lesser extent—the town of Oslo and Norwegian geography, as well as fundamental elements, like water, stone and fire, as they surreally and metaphorically operate outside and inside the protagonist.

Introduction and General Remarks

Fakta om Finland (Facts about Finland, however, not yet translated in English) consists of the nameless protagonist's story narrated in first person through the whole book with very, very long sentences, sometimes longer than one page. No division in chapters is provided, nor any other means to distinguish the single parts of the text. This structure has the evident purpose of reproducing the protagonist's state of mind, which is often anxious and confused, as he constantly struggles to point out an order in his life and in the world around him; yet, ironically, this organization of the text even shows how everything in the world may be potentially connected with anything else, so that the protagonist's attempts to build up a pattern or find out a meaning are often frustrated.

The book is lively and funny, and is about an awkward, lonely Norwegian in his thirties, who mainly lives on writing tourist guides: this talent places him in the broad and powerful world of media and marketing, a dimension he is proud to belong to (and one of the few things that offer him perspective, projects, and a sort of stability). Still towards the end of the novel, for instance, he likes to say that he needs to engage a living relationship with any subject he is charged to exploit, so deeply that he becomes one with it. The Embassy of Finland in Oslo commissions a brochure from him about Finland in order to attract more Norwegian tourists than those who currently visit that country. They rely on his renowned competence and on his knowledge about Finland, even though, unluckily (for them!), he has never been there, and has no contact with that country—although he pretends to have—and he goes on lying and collecting news to fill his brochure. Therefore, he will have to face three main questions, each of them becoming

more or less important according to what happens to him in the novel: What do I know about Finland? What does Finland consist of (what is *Finland* or what is *Finnish*)? How can I convince Norwegians to spend their holidays there?

The unceasing series of very long sentences mostly stems from the protagonist's inclination to think by taking any new idea, word or element from the surroundings and developing it through chains of thoughts, in a bizarre and amusing way that makes the reader sympathize with him from the beginning. Whatever happens to him, or what he reads or hears about, develops in his mind like a waterfall or an overwhelming river (and these metaphors are not chosen randomly, as I am going to show). However, this premise does not lead to a proper stream of consciousness; actually, he constantly tries to understand the outer world by collecting beliefs, news, hearsay and impressions, in a huge effort which turns out to be just an extreme version of what all of us do daily to survive. Occasionally, his train of thought leads to bitter sarcasm about society, social norms, human limits, and so on. Here lies the praised humour of the book: in a potentially endless series of situations that make one smile, laugh, reflect, and even identify oneself alternately with the protagonist and with his astonished friends, acquaintances and passers-by.

A Lonely Man Scared by Change, Who Goes on Mapping Himself and The Outer World

The protagonist's general unease is reported from the very beginning, when his main enemy is mentioned: "Jeg drømmer om vann igjen" (I dream of water again, 5).¹ He is particularly frightened by water because water is a common fluid, whose shape may change all the time, and which can both drag things away and modify the landscape. Water runs and it is never the same, even more: water can hardly be controlled or mastered; as a matter of fact, he feels at ease with it only when having a shower, when he can adjust quantity or temperature and have a sort of control on it.

¹ All quoted passages are taken from Loe, Erlend, *Fakta om Finland*, Oslo, Cappelen Damm AS, 2013 [first edition J.W. Cappelens Forlag As, 2001]; hereafter, only the page number will be indicated in brackets at the end of each quotation. All translations from Norwegian are my own.

Water remains the main metaphor of change in the novel, and it pursues the protagonist, who loves and looks for anything stable and apparently unchanging. We may observe that this fundamental attitude is maintained until the last pages of the novel, though sometimes the protagonist seems to question it. Part of the humour that marks the whole narration is linked with its diary-like style, according to which the brochure writer does not conceal the main paradox from the reader: he is supposed to make people travel while he hates travelling.

Herregud, folk er så enkle. De tror at alt blir bra bare de reiser til andre land. Hvis jeg skulle ha laget en brosjyre for egen regning, ville jeg ha oppfordret folk til å bli hvor de er. Det er billigere, og det er minst like mye å hente [...] Vi læres opp til å like forandring, til å ønske den velkommen. Det er sykt og jeg forstår det ikke [...] Folk reiser for mye [...] jeg tror det er skadelig å reise. Ikke bare for miljøet, men også for psyken. Vi blir urolige. Vi blir uformelige og flytende, som vann (22-29).²

This idea is confirmed while he is visiting a travel fair in order to have an updated account for already existing brochures about Finland. The mass of tourist offers makes him feel dizzy, so that he eventually dreams of an explosion of the whole building due to an excess of possibilities! So many places gathered in one cannot lead to anything good, he feels, though visitors are precisely looking for that: after all, this is his first and most traumatic experience of a commonly accepted construction of the space, which in his mind turns into an unforgivable deformation of reality.

During the whole novel, the protagonist constantly presents his habits, his beliefs and his alleged reference points from his own lifestyle, such as his self-confidence when he is alone and his love for concreteness (ironically, one might observe, while his world view is based on a mess of bizarre speculations). Actually, he proves to be extremely curious about other people, in this way developing a hyper-sensibility to anything happening around him and always wondering what other people are

² "My God, people are so simple. They think that everything will be better if they only travel to other countries. If I had to write a brochure on my own, I would encourage people to remain where they are. It is cheaper, and there is at least as much to get as elsewhere [...] We are taught to appreciate changes, even to welcome them. That's something insane I don't understand [...] People travel too much [...] I think it is harmful to travel. Not only for the environment, but also for one's psyche. We become uneasy. We become shapeless and liquid, like water".

thinking, what their day looks like, even where they are going. When, in his loneliness, he does not have someone in particular to observe, he falls back on statistics, dates and news to somehow categorize the world. An evident construction of space (in this last case a 'scientific' one) takes place inside him, but this occasionally leads to uneasiness, as he has little control over the scenery he figures out and some alarming or irritating elements come to the surface.

His general state of mind is highly affected by his meeting with a woman who works where he has to retrieve his car (which has been removed for the third consecutive time because it was parked where it was forbidden on the national holiday!). His relationship with her upsets him thoroughly and causes him to blame both himself and the outer world for all the problems and changes he will encounter. Yet, she will really help him (probably) come out of the idiosyncratic existence he has condemned himself to, so that the novel also acquires the features of a *Bildungsroman*. In the context of our survey, it is relevant how he perceives the very beginning of this change, through the elaboration of a climatic metaphor to describe what is occurring inside him:

jeg er vann, jeg er is, det er istid i hodet, og det som jeg frykter og ønsker mest av alt er at det skal tine og begynne å flyte igjen, for et forhold flyter mer enn noe annet, det fosser og skummer, men ensomheten flyter ikke noen steder, den bare er, og den er trygg, for da vet man hva man har og hva man får, men forhold flyter (90).³

This kind of image, developing on the initial metaphor of the novel, paradoxically allows the protagonist to be directly connected with nature and the environment, and to be essentially permeable to the material space around him, although always in ways he cannot master. Such an attitude establishes a peculiar exchange between the protagonist and the space.

In parallel with the overwhelming display of the outer, natural world, and with the gradual, tiresome discovery of Finland, the protagonist's remarks may be seen as a *mapping* of his personality, especially in

³ "I am water, I am ice, there is ice in my head, and what I am mostly scared of and desire is that it gets thinner and starts flowing again, because a relationship flows more than anything else, it falls like water and foams, but loneliness does not flow anywhere, it is just there, and it is safe, as then one knows what one has and what one can do, but relationships flow."

the use of short and apodictic considerations that become a sort of boundary of his psychological landscape, like “et forhold betyr vann og kompromisser og forandring, man må gi og ta, og jeg hater å gi og ta.” (72); “finnene måtte teste meg og spørre meg ut, så det var tvil og jeg hater tvil, for tvil flyter og jeg liker best ting som er hugget i fjell, selv om fjell også flyter av og til” (115); or “det er godt å snu seg av og til, det er i hvert fall godt å vite at man kan snu seg hvis man vil. Men det beste er å stikke av” (116).⁴

As we can already appreciate in the few mentioned examples, the protagonist alternates between a very tendentious attitude (e.g. his considerations on Finns) and a more critical point of view on his job (e.g. his ‘wise’—though once again paradoxical—ideas on travellers’ impact on the environment and the spoiling effect of travels on their lives). He might be defined as a person with a weak personality and strong habits, who is ready to be caught by any stimulus coming from the outside as well as from his mind (sometimes simultaneously). Yet, on the one hand, this characterization allows him to play different roles and perspectives in the novel, acting both as a hero and as his antagonist; on the other hand—and this is crucial in the present survey—his weaknesses and volubility will have Finland gain more and more room as the story develops, eventually leading to the confrontation between two proper characters (Finland and him).

In his awkwardness, stemming from a fundamental desire for stability he ascribes to the Norwegian national soul (as we are going to see), the protagonist is capable of flashing intuitions, coming from the unmanageable mess of news, thoughts, information any human being is exposed to every day. The representation of his personality swings, in my opinion, from the caricature of modern obsessions and morbid fears to the outburst of a very wise alienation in a society that forces everyone to move, buy, experience as much as possible, far beyond real needs, and according to enormous economical prescriptions.

⁴ “A relationship means water and compromises and change, one must give and take, and I hate to give and take.”; “Finns had to test me and assess me, so there came doubts, and I hate doubts, because doubts flow and I mostly like things that are engraved in the rock, even if rock, too, sometimes flows.”; “it is good to turn over sometimes, in any case it is good to know that one can turn over if one wants. But the best thing is to escape.”

Finland as a Point of Reference

Looking for Useful References in Finnish Culture (and Landscape)

As should be clear from my rational formulation of the mess of (mostly) irrational thoughts produced by the protagonist during the whole novel, his main task involves not only his own professional goals, but also the idea of knowledge itself. Implicitly, people's relationship with knowledge is questioned by the representation (in the character of the protagonist) of how naïve people usually are when they want or have to talk about subjects where they lack expertise. The protagonist's very first approach to the unknown Finland (in response to a list of possible attractions suggested by the Embassy staff) is a long series of common places, like Finnish lakes, Nokia, design, or heterogeneous names and data, like Edith Södergran, Winter War, Jean Sibelius:

og da kan man jo selv tenke seg hvor viktig det er for finnene å gå i badstu, de har millioner av badstuer, ser jeg for meg, og de drikker vodka og pisker seg med bjerkeris og det er stor stor stemming [...] Og finnene har Kalevala, visst pokker har de Kalevala, et urtidsepos, eller hva det er, jeg har sett det på tv, smålinger med skjegg løper rundt og synger og ofrer kvinner og hverandre til gud og hvermann. Og de har reinsdyr, de har mengder av doble vokaler, de har sprit. / Jeg kan masse om Finland (11-12).⁵

This first sample, as well as its naïvely comforting conclusion, is, in my view, much more than a rough starting point. Actually, by starting with his own personal experience and proving his own 'awareness', the protagonist is showing how people already dispose of considerable—if not even "a mass of"—information about numerous subjects, regardless of how accurate and grounded this information may be. Human beings, and not only this novel's protagonist, are in constant search for references and explanations, and when they do not find them or when those they find are not satisfying enough, they often rely—almost automatically—on inferences, in order to integrate their cultural gaps.

⁵ "and then one can even imagine how important it is for the Finns to go to the sauna, they have millions of saunas, I can see them, and they drink vodka and whip themselves with birch twigs and there is a great, great atmosphere [...] And the Finns have Kalevala, damn, of course Kalevala, a very ancient epos, or something like that, I saw it on TV, weird, bearded fellows run here and there sacrificing women and sacrificing one another to anyone, with no distinction. And they have reindeers, they have a lot of double vowels and they have alcohol. / I really know loads about Finland".

In spite of his partly genuine desire for knowledge, the tourist guide writer is often ruled by such mechanisms, so as not to have a full control of what he is exploring and exploiting. At the same time, his plain (though bizarre) and basic way of thinking detects such common bias.

In the beginning, the protagonist does not go far from trivial or obvious connections, but soon, actually already during the first meeting with the Embassy staff, he comes to something new, drawing inspiration from that situation. He has just told them that he is a bit confused and upset due to the removal of his car, and, to his pleasure, he can assess their polite and human reaction: “Finnene sier at det var leit å høre, fine folk, disse finnene, empatiske, det må jeg huske å få med i brosjyren. Finnene er fine folk, kan jeg skrive, gjestmilde og tolerante, og har du et problem, så løser de det.” (15).⁶ Here the protagonist, who had already wondered what kind of people he was about to find, transforms a pleasant impression into a useful observation for his job. In this way, he arbitrarily accelerates the process of knowledge (furthermore, relying on a very small sample!), and meanwhile he gives proof of the kind of pragmatism, I would say even cynicism, that is required in his field. However, the situation will rapidly change and pass from the investigation of a harmless world (which seems to be there just to be discovered and exploited) into the confrontation with a hard, living and sometimes hostile Finland, as is variously managed by the protagonist.

The first great access to Finland culture he points out is Jean Sibelius: several pages are devoted to the protagonist’s experience of his music, which is *Nordic* but particularly *Finnish*: “Sibelius hadde en sterkt national sinnelagt [...] hans musikk er med andre ord Finland” (37).⁷ Here he draws on an official stereotype, which is connected with the cultural canon of European music: the idea (and shortcut) that an artist can embody and represent the spirit of a whole country and, therefore, can be assumed as a suitable access to know that country. Loe’s management of this passage is mainly aimed at the readers’ amusement, but something else relevant is staged, namely the development of unconscious reactions to Sibelius’ music that, on the one hand, lead to

⁶ “the [two] Finns say it was sad to hear that; fine people, these Finns, empathetic, I must remember to include it in the brochure. Finns are fine people, I can write, gentle to guests and tolerant, and if you have a problem, they will solve it”.

⁷ “Sibelius had a strong national inspiration [...] his music, in other word, is Finland”.

a very individual exploitation of the alleged “Finnish” experience, and, on the other hand, increase the disappointment due to the inadequacy of the music.

While listening to it, the brochure writer begins to visualize Finnish landscapes in summer, with a young Finnish woman from the country who is waiting for him, but soon she becomes thoughtful and scared, while looking towards east. Summer turns into autumn and it is clear that the woman is fleeing from the pursuit of the Russian Tsar. In this vision, created by the music in his mind, the protagonist follows her in the wood, eventually finding a car (and it is just his removed car!), and a romantic *rendez-vous* seems to await him. Yet, Sibelius has planned a different story, with a further change of atmosphere that makes everything fade away and triggers the protagonist’s complaints:

Jean Sibelius! Han og inkonsekvensen hans. Han og dynamikken hans. Mild tog hardt, lyst og mørkt, kjærlighet og hat, fred og krig, passivt aggressivt [...] [D]enne musikken er farlig, og Jean er farlig, Jean er vann, jeg er ikke i tvil, alt han tok i ble til vann, og musikken hans er vann, den er forandring, og ikke bare er den forandring, den er omveltning (42, 45).⁸

Sibelius’ music therefore proves to be anything but a reliable companion to start composing a pleasant and attractive image of Finland. Furthermore, in the short space of a musically inspired vision, Finland has dropped the mask and shown all its dynamism, sliding down into that hell made of water and instability that the protagonist fears so deeply. Sibelius is definitely ascribed to the hostile part of the Finnish soul, and the protagonist will suggest that his readers avoid him.

Negative aspects, however, always lie in wait for a brochure writer who has been charged to describe the best of Finland in four weeks: as he considers what Norwegians read or see from Finland, he is well aware of a serious difficulty when one is working on a bright image of Finland, that is, the already existing image of Finland as it has been shaped by media.

⁸ “Jean Sibelius! He and his inconsistency. He and his dynamism. Mild and hard, bright and dark, love and hate, peace and war, passively aggressive [...] This music is dangerous, and Jean is dangerous, Jean is water, I have no doubt, everything he took on became water, and his music is water, it is change, and not only change, but upsetting”.

Når Finland betraktes fra Norge sliter det f. eks. med at Norsk Rikskringkasting kjøpte en handfull finske TV-produksjoner for noen tiår siden. Tunge, tunge produksjoner, med fåmælte karakterer som lot øksen snakke der de selv kom til kort, og de kom ofte til kort. Disse produksjonene var så dystre at det norske bildet av Finland aldri helt har rettet seg opp igjen. Og i tillegg assosierer nordmenn sprit og selvmord og galskap med Finland. Vi ser for oss at bildene på det finske nasjonalgalleriet skildrer fadermord og glissen høstskog og familier som ror sitt døde barn til kirkegården, og nakenhet, mye ydmykende nakenhet, ser vi for oss, men dette bildet av Finland er sikkert både urettferdig og skjevt, for Finland er jo også så mye annet, så mye sol og glede, og latter, Finland er latter, tenker jeg, og det er soleklart at det trengs en brosjyre (54-55).⁹

What is thought about another country does not depend, only, on a consolidated tradition that is based on the cultural and economical exchange between the countries, but also on the relatively rapid creation and diffusion of stereotypical or, at least, very characterized media products, which play a decisive role in the case of a not so well-known neighbour. After kindness, empathy, experience in smart items, and tolerance, very striking opposite features take the floor: gloominess, nakedness, suicide, death, and even alcohol: "Og det aller beste er hvis en finne drikker seg til døde på kort tid, da er nyheten garantert å nå norske aviser. [...] Det var ikke annet å vente, vil samboeren si. Gale folk, når de ikke dypper seg i isvann så drikker de seg i hjel" (55).¹⁰ At this point, a contradictory image of Finland, emerging from struggling constructions of place, is already well defined, but the main aspect

⁹ "If we look at Finland from Norway, the problem may be, for instance, that the national broadcaster Norsk Rikskringkasting has purchased several Finnish productions in the last decades. Heavy, heavy productions, with reserved characters who let their axe talk when things got worse, and they often got worse. These productions were so gloomy that the Norwegian image of Finland has never recovered. And, in addition, Norwegians associate alcohol, suicide and madness with Finland. We imagine that paintings in the Finnish National Museum show parricides, and sparse woods, and families who take their dead child to the churchyard, and nakedness, much humiliating nakedness, we imagine, but this idea of Finland is certainly wrong and tendentious, because Finland is much more, so much sun and joy and laughter, Finland is laughter, I think, and it is as clear as daylight that a brochure is needed."

¹⁰ "And the best of all is when a Finn drink to death in short time, then news is granted in Norwegian newspapers. [...] Nothing else was to be expected, the housemate will say. Crazy people, when they do not drown in icy water then they drink themselves to death."

to highlight is, in my opinion, that Finland seems to be affected by a similar set of stereotypes as Nordic countries when trivially represented by Southern European people (darkness, suicide, alcohol)!

Furthermore, even in the writing of his brochure, the protagonist's main adversary is, once again, water, as Finland is so rich in water. At a certain point, he even plans to conceal this feature, but he has to conclude that Finns, who eventually have to approve his work, would never understand, "finske vannhoder" (57, Finnish waterheads)! Fortunately, nature always provides some counterparts to remedy all the unease he is struggling against: in this case, he can rely on birds.

Jeg må skrive noe om småfugler. For vi nordmenn elsker småfugler, tenker jeg [...] De elsker meg og jeg dem. Og slik har alle nordmenn det. Uten unntak. [...] Det kommer til en punkt i alle nordmenns liv hvor småfuglene må få sitt [...] Det fins flere småfugler i Finland enn i noe annet land i Norden, skriver jeg i brosjyren (61-62, 64).¹¹

In the protagonist's strategy, birds are both an outer element (very present, in addition) and a source of pleasure (for him as Norwegian). They display, therefore, the best result in his restless search for a comfortable home made of friendly things or beings. In this part of the novel he is approaching space from the outside, and fighting against his fears by collecting allies in the environment.

We may notice a development in his approach to Finland after his meeting with the woman ("The Sister", as she is Bim's Sister, and the protagonist does not mention her real name, in this way connoting her as a character of his own story): from a contradictory gathering of common places, the guide writer moves on to more stable and consistent concepts, however, without abandoning his (apparently reluctant) humour. Finnish democracy represents a starting point here.

Finland er et demokrati, skriver jeg. Et moderne demokrati [...] Folk har lyst til å besøke moderne demokratier, som har mobildekning overalt. [...] Dette er noe for familier med tenåringer, tenker jeg. Når tenåringene får høre at Finland er stor på mobiltelefoner, at det på sett og vis er mobiltelefonens hjemland, vil de trygle om å få bli med. De kan

¹¹ "I have to write something on little birds. As we Norwegians love little birds, I think [...] They love me and I love them. And so do all Norwegians. Without exception. [...] A moment comes in every Norwegian's life when little birds must have what they deserve [...] There are more sorts of little birds in Finland than in any other Nordic country, I write in the brochure."

sitte i baksetet og tekstmelde vennene sine i Norge [...], og det gjelder å holde kommunikasjonen i gang, også om sommeren, og Finland er det perfekte landet å reise til for de som ønsker å tekstmelde, skriver jeg (79-80).¹²

In the usual naively sarcastic style that marks the novel, democracy is not a higher value which has been conquered through great sacrifices, but rather a kind of amusement park where people enjoy all the freedom to communicate with the newest and smartest devices. Even democracy, one might notice, is forced into the mould of customers' (travellers') expectations, and a tourist guide writer cannot help but feel the need to address the largest public of readers, by appealing to the youngest ones. Stereotypes (however, based on basic factual ground, as Finland is a democracy) are shaped without scruples for the most commercial requirements.

The protagonist draws inspiration from anything happening around him, and, just before his second meeting with the woman at the office where she works, he is observing the wood around him, meanwhile thinking of Finland and finding a new idea for his brochure: Finland has much to offer in terms of nature, the problem is how to promote Finland's nature for Scandinavians, who already have a strong experience of nature. The protagonist's strategy is therefore to pick up Denmark, a familiar country for Norwegians, and to highlight the difference between Danish and Finnish landscapes; however, he does this by praising their common attractions, like flatland.

jeg har kommet i tanker om at det er mye skog i Finland. Naturens evige ønske om å gjøre alt flatt har kommet lenger i Finland enn i mange andre land, noterer jeg. Det er flatt og det er skog og som følge av det er det et perfekt land å reise til hvis man liker flathet og skog. Hvis man f. eks. har feriert i Danmark gjentatte ganger, og hvem har ikke det [...] for Danmark er så barnevennlig og fint [...] og tenkt at man liker at det er så flatt, men at man savner noe skog, så er Finland et perfekt

¹² "Finland is a democracy, I write. A modern democracy [...] People have the desire to visit modern democracies, which have mobile network coverage everywhere. [...] This is something for families with teenagers, I think. When teenagers hear that Finland is great as regards mobile phones, that it is somehow mobile phones' homeland, they will beg to be a part in it. They can sit on the back seat and send messages to their friend in Norway [...], and it's about keeping communication going, even in summer, and Finland is the perfect land to travel to for those who wish to send messages, I write."

alternativ, noterer jeg. Alle som har en dragning mot flat skog, kan trygt reise til Finland, noterer jeg, og de vil ikke bli skuffet (83).¹³

People's psychological mechanisms are presented as basic, and potential readers are essentially reduced to children to be satisfied or spoiled, but in all earnestness and reliability. Finland is, on the other hand, characterized as a peculiar land with its own position in Scandinavia, therefore both as a comforting, familiar experience, and as something different and new which is worth trying.

However, this constitutes a sort of climax in the story, and for many pages the protagonist will not return to Finnish stereotypes nor to his own peculiar construction of the Finnish land and space: the more he will be involved by The Sister's and her younger brother's life and adventure, the less time and mindfulness he will have to collect ideas on Finland. Actually, after a brief reference to Finnish investments on cultural life and, once again, to Finnish popular brands (113-114), we come to the last part of his survey on Finnish attitudes and facilities right after his training with The Sister, with whom he has gone jogging on the hills above Oslo. The degree of idealisation is brought to its highest outcomes, featuring all the elements he finds in a National Geographic issues of the 1981: typical Finnish features are supposed to be their love for country life and the importance they give to art and culture, something which is reflected in the outline of Helsinki, a "fornuftig, alltid ærlig og velorganisert by" where "befolkningen er homogen, skriver jeg, slum eksisterer ikke, ei heller områder som er befengt med korrupsjon eller kjøp og salg av sex"; furthermore "Folk i Helsinki lider av den naturlige skyheten som følger av nettopp å ha vendt seg til nærheten som et urbant liv fører med seg, skriver jeg nå, og dette mistolkes ofte som skepsis og mangel på gjestfrihet av tilreisende" (153).¹⁴ Finally, due

¹³ "I got to think that there is plenty of woods in Finland. Nature's constant effort to make everything flat has come further in Finland than in many other lands, I note. It is flat and there are woods and, as a consequence, it is the perfect land to travel to if one likes flatland and woods. If, for instance, one has spent holidays in Denmark several times, and who hasn't done it [...] because Denmark is friendly to children and nice [...], and thinks that it is beautiful that it is so flat, but there are not enough woods, so Finland is a perfect alternative, I note. All those who are attracted by flat woods, can travel to Finland in all safety, I note, and they will not be disappointed".

¹⁴ "a rational, always honest and well organised city"; "the population is homogeneous, I write, slums do not exist, nor areas that are affected by corruption or sex trade"; "people suffer from the natural shyness which is connected with the forced proximity of

to the hostile climate they have to experience, Finns have learnt how to spare warmth (153). As we can assess, Finnish features somehow mix up with generally Nordic or in particular Scandinavian ones: here the guide writer exploits the sense of community that Norwegians are supposed to find and appreciate in Finland, and as a consequence he needs another term of comparison, somewhere farther than Denmark, namely Mediterranean countries.

der er folk så umiddelbare og ukritiske og glade, men til gjengjeld litt enkle og kjedelige, og det tar bare noen minutter å komme under huden på dem, mens det kan ta en hel ferie, ja, et helt liv noen ganger, å komme under hudene på finnene, men til gjengjeld fins det [...] en dybde, en sjelelig dybde, en avgrunn, nærmest, og en indre styrke som finnene kaller *sisu*, og jeg slår *sisu* opp i leksikonet mitt og det står: utholdenhet, seig kraft, kamplyst, bade legemlig og sjelelig, og [...] vi liker at man ikke gir seg, men sliter og sliter, det liker vi (154).¹⁵

One might acknowledge that the guide writer has succeeded here in blending Finnish familiarity for Norwegians with its surprising exoticism, a kind of otherness that is worth exploring. Not by chance, maybe, the last topic that he associates with Finland is granite, all stability, reliability, even accountability of rock in front of anything flowing and changing in life (unluckily, the Sister will eventually show him the wrongness of this opinion!). Finnish “smak, stil og steming [...] har sine røtter i sjøens tekstur, i isformasjonene og i granittens soliditet. De er særlig dette med granitt jeg liker, for granitt er så tungt og uforanderlig, og det må være mye av den i Finland” (156).¹⁶

From a psychological perspective, the brochure turns into a shelter for the protagonist, whose attitude is more markedly stereotypical when

urban life, I write now, and this is often misinterpreted as distrust and lack of hospitality towards travellers.”

¹⁵ “there people are so immediate and uncritical and happy, but in return a little simple and boring, and it only takes a few minutes to get under their skin, while it can take a whole vacation, yes, a whole life sometimes, to get under the skins of the Finns, but in return there is [...] a depth, a psychological depth, an abyss, most properly, and an inner strength that Finns call *sisu*, and I look up *sisu* in my lexicon and it says: perseverance, toughness, fighting spirit, both physical and psychological, and [...] we like those who don’t give up, but go on struggling, we like that.”

¹⁶ “[Finnish] taste, style and mood [...] have their roots in the texture of the sea, in ice formations and in the solidity of granite. It is especially this reference to granite that I like, because granite is so heavy and unchangeable, and there must be a lot of it in Finland”.

he finds material to build his presentation on. Here, he has his job (to promote Finland) ironically take an unsustainable development, made of an exaggeratedly ideal image of Finland, which in turn displays all his distance and lack of interest in the subject. The brochure is essentially the place where he thinks he can comfortably sit, while all his world is moving around him and is ready to take him far away from home.

Displaying Norway While Describing Finland

The protagonist goes on thinking and writing about Finland while staying in Norway, and takes the chance (and all amusement) to convey the image of Finland from a Norwegian perspective. This implies occasional references to the Norwegian world view, as well as Norwegian landscape and society. The first Norwegian contextualization of his position regards a common love for stability, which prevents him from being an outsider: “jeg hater forandring [...] jeg liker å tro at de fleste andre nordmenn har det på samme måte, vi er nordmenn hele gjengen, og vi misliker det som er nytt, og spesielt hvis det kommer fra et annet land, kanskje unntatt USA” (57).¹⁷ As shown, some of the first hints at Norway concern the average Norwegian reader he figures out, who should be comforted by the presence of birds in Finland and potentially attracted by the flat Finnish landscape, rich in woods. Granite is then presented as a beloved element for Norwegians. All these statements, far from being a reliable context, are a funny and awkward justification for the protagonist’s fear of changes. However, all these references also contribute to the outline of a specific home place, or home culture, from which one can observe foreign Finland.

From a constructed place to a constructed place, we might say. Such premises occasionally trigger more realistic considerations on Norwegian way of life and expectations.

Norsk er så fattig, vi må klare oss som best vi kan, tenker jeg, for Norge er et fattig land, fattig på historie, fattig på språk, fattig på kunst og kultur og nesten alt annet, utenom olje, men olje er en forbigående ressurs, snart er vi fattige igjen, og da kan ingen reise på ferie lenger, så

¹⁷ “I hate changes [...] I like to think that most Norwegians live as I do, we are Norwegians, after all, and we don’t like what is new, especially if it comes from another country, maybe except USA”.

det haster med å få denne brosjyren ferdig, mens det ennå fins ferier og penger der ute (155).¹⁸

As is clear, even thoughts about Norway develop according to the same taste for paradoxes and exaggerations as those about Finland. Furthermore, Norway emerges more and more as the story unfolds: this is obviously due to his need to leave Oslo and travel some hundred kilometres to go and rescue Bim (so that he is surrounded by Norwegian landscape, which affects his thoughts about the troubled circumstances); still, this might suggest a recovered relationship with his home country, in all its contradictions and, eventually, lack of comforting features!

uten bilen stopper Norge, heter det seg, og det kan ved første øyeblikk virke som om det er noe i det, for dette landet er ekstremt på alle måter, også geografisk [...] og ting vil vi ha, mønsteret når det gjelder ting, er at hver generasjon håper å kunne gi sine barn flere ting enn de hadde selv, og det blir mange ting, det blir ting på ting på ting, fjell av ting, blir det [...] Norge stopper ikke et sekund uten bilen. Norge fortsetter i samme tempo som det alltid har hatt, med bil eller uten, istider kommer og går, mennesker kommer og går, Norge trenger ikke en eneste bil (160).¹⁹

In this ecological plea (or, at least, criticism on modern frenetic life and its dull expectations), the most relevant element from the perspective of construction of place is the “mountain” (*fjell*) of things placed beside real mountains. The human world lies beside the natural world, but irreducibly distinguished from it. This train of thought plays the essential role of uncovering the umpteenth cause of discomfort and allowing the protagonist to vent all his stress. However, this happens

¹⁸ “Norwegian is so poor, we have to do as good as we can, I think, because Norway is a poor country, poor in history, poor in language, poor in arts and culture and almost everything else, except oil, but oil is a transient resource, soon we are poor again, and then no one can travel on holiday anymore, so it is urgent to get this brochure completed, while there are still vacations and money out there”.

¹⁹ “without car, Norway stops, they say, and at first glance it may seem like there is something right in it, because this country is extreme in every way, also geographically [...] and we want things, the model when it comes to things, is that every generation hopes to be able to give their children more things than they had themselves, and there will be many things, there will be things upon things upon things mountains of things there will be [...] Norway will not stop for a second without car. Norway continues at the same pace as it has always had, with or without car, ice ages come and go, people come and go, Norway does not need a single car”.

through an imaginative interaction between the natural and the artificial landscape.

Gradually, the protagonist's home country seems to display a kind of cruel or even sadistic attitude to its inhabitants, who vainly concentrate in bigger centres to escape loneliness and lack of chances, whereas they end up cultivating a deep yearning for home, and eventually they find themselves rootless, in Norway as well as anywhere else (160). On the whole, his meditations on his own country prove to be triggered by the uneasy task of reconstructing the image of a foreign, unknown country.

Finland as a Friend and a Nurse

The main pattern of the novel is based on the emerging of a Finnish 'response' to the protagonist's state of mind: due to the task of writing a brochure, which offers him a bit of unexpected stability, and due to the short deadline, this country often accompanies the protagonist in fundamental circumstances. The increasing change brought by the meeting with The Sister and Bim upsets his life, leading him to reflect on his beliefs and, above all, on his habits as a lonely, slightly misanthropic man. This informal psychoanalytic therapy is followed by (and mirrored in) a more and more dramatic relationship with Finland, which takes on the status of a lively, stubborn, independent character in the protagonist's mind and visions. In a sense, Finland becomes his brutal, unpredictable but effective therapist, although all efforts are obviously made by the protagonist as a patient, while coming back again and again to the subject of his brochure.

jeg har mine tanker om banker, og om Finland, som alle andre. Og finske banker. Jeg tør ikke engang tenke på det. Der er jeg helt blank. (22) La meg tenke litt, grønt, vel, det er jo naturens egen farge, det er miljø og vår og forelskelse og ungdom. Muligheter. Grønt er muligheter. Og det er Finland. Grønt er Finland, noterer jeg (27).²⁰

A comparable feeling of self-comfort is produced by the charming vision of the Finnish country woman led by Sibelius' or by the idea

²⁰ "I have my own thoughts about banks, and about Finland, like all the others. And Finnish banks. I don't dare at all think about it. There I am completely blank."; "Let me think a bit, green, well, as you know it's nature's own colour, it is environment and spring and falling in love and youth. Chances. Green is chances. And it is Finland. Green is Finland, I note."

of granite as a typical feature of the Finnish landscape. The survey he actually leads on Finland's nature (based on the mentioned issue of the *National Geographic*) offers further chances for him to be provided with a suitable representation of his own condition and necessities through geographical elements; the most fruitful outcome of his elaboration of Finnish references are likely his thoughts on the Baltic Sea:

jeg har alltid hatt et blødende hjerte for Østersjøen, for den er en tapersjø i manges øjne, den er brakkvann, og brakkvann er tapervann, syns man [...] for det er næringsfattig vann, det står mye stille, og på mange måter er Østersjøens brakkvann mitt vann, for det står stille, det er ikke som vann flest, men stille, så det forandrer ikke eller ødelegger som annet vann, det er medgjørilig og sykt vann, og derfor mitt vann (155-156)²¹

During the whole novel, the protagonist has no counterpart to discuss his world view and share his feelings, apart from the fundamental character of The Sister (and, secondarily, of Bim). This is the main reason why he needs to search for images of himself in elements surrounding him, and, as he is researching a particular place, a series of environmental tokens feature in his reasonings and in his visions.

Finland, however, remains the unquestioned protagonist and the point of return for all his geographical speculations, as we can assess when he presents a possible remedy for Finnish gloominess, something which might spoil the charming connotation he aims to give Finland.

Det er barfotgang i vått gress som skal til, skriver jeg. Det er Finlands eneste håp, og vi nordmenn må hjelpe dem, vi må vise dem hvordan man gjør det, og det fins massevis av gress i Finland, og mye av det er vått [...] ta av dere fottøyet og gå barbeint i gresset og få finnene til å gjøre det samme, tving av dem skoene [...] og send dem ut i gresset, la dem gå rundt, barbeinte, i det våte gresset, la dem kjenne på gresset, og på følelsene som sprenger på, på smerten [...] og la dette være vår gave til finnene, skriver jeg, vi kurerer dem for tungsinn og til gjengjeld får vi lov til å feriere i dette flotte landet, som har så mye å by på og som

²¹ "I have always felt a pain in my heart when considering the Baltic Sea, as it is a loser for many people, it is brackish water, and brackish water is a losing water, they think [...] because it is poor in nutrients, it often stands still, and in many ways the Baltic Sea's brackish water is my water, because it stands still, it is not like most water, but still, so it doesn't change and doesn't destroy anything like other water, it is submissive and sick, and therefore it is my water".

aldri vil slutte å fascinere med sin magiske mystikk og sin merkelige tiltrekningskraft (192-193).²²

The protagonist has now developed a proper relationship with Finland and, to seal this new friendship (also depicted as a brotherhood, probably to set a balance with the couple of people he deals with), he starts dreaming of being a hungry, migratory bird flying over different countries, from Africa to North Europe (this implies, by the way, a few stereotypical *realia*, all regarding national dishes), that ends its journey in the wonderful Finland:

mitt elskede Finland, et vadefuglparadis, med aspik, hvor de baker fisk inn i brød og hvor stillhet råder, og som vadefugl elsker jeg aspik og brød og fisk og stillhet, så jeg går inn for landing og Finland kommer meg grasiøst i møte, og vi kiler hverandre på magen, Finland og jeg (195).²³

Here we have a double transformation, of both the protagonist and, eventually, Finland, a welcoming country that turns into a wader to play with the wader-protagonist. On the one hand, Finland lively displays all its peculiarity, which is worth meeting and exploring; on the other hand, it shows a sort of elective affinity with the protagonist. All this vanishes as a daydream, yet, it conveys one of the most powerful metaphors for the intense relationship and (actually unilateral) exchange between Finland and the protagonist.

At this stage, the country he is expected to describe turns into a friend to share secrets with; unluckily, Finland's closeness and stubbornness in living on its own becomes the main problem for the protagonist, who reflects on his possibly too aggressive approach with Finland (196), eventually acknowledging that "det er et vanskelig land å komme noen

²² "It is walking barefoot in wet grass that is necessary, I write. It is Finland's only hope, and we Norwegians must help them, we must show them how to do it, and there is plenty of grass in Finland, and much of it is wet [...] take off your footwear and walk barefoot in the grass and get the Finns to do the same, force them off their shoes [...] and send them out into the grass, let them walk around, barefoot, in the wet grass, let them feel the grass, and the emotions that burst on, let them feel the pain [...] and let this be our gift to the Finns, I write, we cure their gloominess and in return we are allowed to go on holiday in this great country, which has so much to offer and which never will stop fascinating with its magical mystique and its strange attractiveness."

²³ "my beloved Finland, a paradise for waders, with aspik, where they bake fish into bread and where silence prevails, and as a wader I love aspik and bread and fish and silence, so I go in for landing and Finland gracefully meets me, and we tickle each other on the stomach, Finland and I".

vei med, det er lukket og stumt og det kommer meg ikke i møte [...] for virkelighetens harde fakta om Finland er at det klarer seg uten meg, Finland vet ikke engang at jeg fins, og deadline er rett rundt hjørnet, så jeg er ganske ille ute” (197).²⁴ Finland acts here as an independent, rebel son (or daughter), who has but a little interest in explaining their own behaviour, values or tastes. In absence of a response coming from Finland, the country eventually displays all its irreducible otherness, threatening him with the danger of sinking (201). Otherness is a recurring feature in the novel, which leads to more and more expressive images of lack of compliance and accountability, and arises to the main theme in the very last part.

Finland as Otherness and as an Active Character in The Novel

Actually, due to the protagonist’s ignorance about Finland, the country is marked as a kind of otherness from the beginning of the novel, when he has to approach to it as something unknown and, furthermore, growing and changing. His speculations are nurtured by all news he manages to grasp while reading the already existing brochures about Finland that he found in the touristic fair.

jeg må finne en inngang [...] for Finland ligger der, og det utvikler seg og vokser, som alle land og alle folk, og jeg må fange denne utviklingen [...] det er alltid starten som er verst, den første setningen, anslaget, som skal gripe og fengsle. Gåtefulle Finland [...] Det mytiske Finland som med sin skjulte tiltrekningskraft har påvirket generasjoner av nordmenn, bevisst eller ubevisst. Finland ligger alltid og lurar bak i hodene våre, om vi vil eller ikke, men hva er egentlig dette finske som vi aldri kan få nok av? Dette er spennende (35).²⁵

²⁴ “it is a difficult country to get some way with, it is closed and mute and it doesn’t help me know it [...] because the hard truth of facts about Finland is that it can do without me, Finland does not even know that I exist, and the deadline is just around the corner, that’s why I’m looking pretty bad”.

²⁵ “I have to find an entrance [...] for Finland is there, and it is developing and growing, like all countries and all people, and I have to grasp this development [...] the beginning is always the worst thing, the first sentence, the impact, which will seize and imprison. Mysterious Finland [...] The mythical Finland which, with its hidden attractiveness, has influenced generations of Norwegians, consciously or unconsciously. Finland is always lying in wait in our minds, whether we want or not, but what is this Finnish that we can never get enough of? This is exciting.”

This overwhelming and exclusive challenge is presented as a national affair (after all, he is working on behalf of all Norwegians!) and as something both demanding and fascinating. A scornful defeat takes place, as I have shown, while he is listening to Sibelius' music, when the composer displays his own version of *finskhet* ('Finnishhood'), which destroys any romantic dream by the protagonist. At a certain point, the brochure writer figures out Norwegian royalty's peculiar experience of Finnish in comparison with an ordinary visit of the country, in an obsessive representation of the task he is supposed to fulfil:

og mens de andre som besøker Finland sitter på vanlige kaféer og drikker vanlig øl og går glipp av de store linjene, de store, finske linjene, ble kronprinsen helt sikkert traktert på beste finske vis og i de finske salongene [...] og han fikk urfinsk mat på finske tallerkener fra tsartiden, og en mengde finsk informasjon (66).²⁶

As we have seen, most of the protagonist's statements on Finland are an expression of his current state of mind, yet his relationship with Finland develops into a proper character, something that will never abandon him, and which, after all, existed before he was engaged with it and goes on existing while he is leading his own life some hundred kilometres away. When The Sister asks him to follow her in search of Bim, he thinks that Finland can wait, as it does not vanish, and this is one of its features (101), a kind of pleasant stability, one might infer, which is later confirmed in a comparison with the area of Oslo (143). However, when he is ready to concentrate again on writing the brochure, Finland is presented as an elusive animal: "Finland er glatt som en ål" (137, "Finland is as smooth as an eel"). This could be a common metaphor to express all the difficulties he is facing, yet, the potential prey of a fisher soon becomes something in need of help, so that for the first and sole time in the novel, the protagonist is faced with a moral dilemma and asked to make a choice. This happens when he is asked to go and fetch Bim, who has followed a group of nazi-inspired adolescents some hundred kilometres northbound:

²⁶ "and while the others who visit Finland sit in ordinary cafés and drink ordinary beers and miss the big lines, the big, Finnish lines, the crown prince was certainly treated in the best Finnish way and in lounges, which are the most Finnish ones [...] and he got Finnish food on Finnish dishes from the Czarist era, and a deal of Finnish information".

jeg er jo menneske, brosjyremenneske, først og fremst, naturligvis, med makt, men også menneske, naken og alene og makteløs, og så lenge man er menneske er man pliktig til å hjelpe andre, tenker jeg, og Finland trenger ikke hjelp på same måte som Bim gjør det, for Bim trenger øyeblikkelig og menneskelig hjelp, mens Finland trenger hjelp til å tjene mer på turister, hjelp til profit (158).²⁷

Meaningfully, this occurs when his relationship with the other characters (The Sister and Bim) is becoming more significant, as if Finland had grown jealous. Actually, this final decision comes when the protagonist has collected and explored several fruitful aspects of Finland and—he feels—he is ready to finish and submit a satisfying piece of work. When he is eventually able to return to the brochure, his position regarding Finland remains of two adversaries, each one asked to tame the other:

jeg har en jobb som krever så mye, som krever nesten alt, og Finland legger beslag på meg og vil måle krefter med meg, og jeg må være konsentrert, så jeg ikke taper, så ikke Finland vinner og jeg taper, jeg må vise Finland hvem som er sjefen, og dagene går, det er ikke mange igjen (183).²⁸

However, a more dramatic struggle is somehow taking place in a deeper layer of his mind: in another vision, Finland does not remain harmless to be exploited by the protagonist whenever he needs for useful materials; on the contrary, it stands up as a rival, and this paradoxically occurs when most troubles seem to be over, and in the quietness of his room.

jeg sitter med Finland igjen, det er Finland og meg, vi måler hverandre med øynene, opp og ned og opp igjen, det er en duell [...] jeg ser Finland rett i øynene, og Finland ser meg rett i øynene, og jeg ser sjøer og skoger og melankoli og badstuer og alt dette finske som jeg overhodet ikke kjenner [...] jeg er flyt, jeg er vann, uten form og nesten

²⁷ “I am a human being, a brochure man, above all, of course, with power, but also a man, bare, lonely and harmless, and as long as one is a man, one ought to help the others, I think, and Finland does not need help in the same way as Bim needs it, because Bim needs immediate and human help, whereas Finland needs help to gain more tourists, help to make a profit.”

²⁸ “I have a job that requires so much, that requires almost everything, and Finland seizes me and wants to measure my strength with me, and I have to concentrate, so that I won’t lose, Finland won’t win and I won’t lose, I have to show Finland who is the boss, and days go by, there are not many left”.

uten egenskaper, jeg har bare noen ytterst få egenskaper [...] og jeg treffer Finland i pannen og Finland treffer meg i pannen og vi faller om og er døde på flekken begge to, og det er ingen siste ord, og ikke en gang siste tanke, og Finland ble min bane og jeg ble Finlands bane [...] og jeg skjønner meg ikke for Finland, men trøsten er at [...] jeg er en gåte for Finland, på samme måte som Finland er en gåte for meg, men det fins småfugler der, mengder av småfugler, som nordmenn elsker (189-191).²⁹

The moment when the protagonist is close to achieving his goal corresponds to that one when Finland's irreducible otherness is fully displayed: too much has happened in the protagonist's life, new relationships, new perspectives, new challenges, not least his travel northbound to rescue Bim which is his only real travel in the novel and his only experience outside Oslo. This irreversible path (and pattern) is going to lead him to the final upsetting situation, when he will have to participate in a race in the team made up by The Sister's colleagues, that is, by people who work for the company that rightfully had removed his car three times, and against another team formed by the Finnish Embassy staff. Finns, still waiting for the brochure about Finland to be submitted the following day, unwillingly embody the enemies, the hard task which has forced all the protagonist's frailties to emerge. The last scene is long, articulated, lively, full of sarcasm, irony and comical features, with the protagonist metaphorically throwing the carcass of a bulky Finland into a fountain and urinating on it, in this way freeing himself from the pressure of the liquid inside him (like a kind of invading water) and starting a liberating march with the sole aim of arriving before the Finns (until the final plot twist).

²⁹ "I sit with Finland again, it is Finland and me, we measure each other with our eyes, up and down and up again, it is a duel [...] I look Finland right in the eyes, and Finland looks me right in the eyes, and I see lakes and woods and melancholy and saunas and all that Finnish stuff I don't know at all [...] I am flux, I am water, without form and almost without qualities, I have just a few superficial features [...] and I shoot Finland in the forehead and Finland shoots me in the forehead and we fall down and are both dead on the floor, with no last word, nor a last thought and Finland becomes my destiny, and I become its [...] and I really don't understand Finland, but it comforts me that [...] I am a mystery for Finland, in the same way as Finland is a mystery for me, but there are little birds there, masses of little birds, that Norwegians love".

Conclusion

In this novel, the writing of a brochure, a very clear and precisely outlined task, intertwines and interacts deeper and deeper with the protagonist's psychological development (and, it seems proper to say, emancipation). Therefore, Finland plays several roles and functions: a professional goal; one of the main subject of the novel; a mirror of all protagonist's fears, joys, values and even method; eventually, a proper character, which the protagonist shows to need before he acknowledges its complete otherness. Unwillingly, of course, it helps him clear out his own needs and gradually becomes his bad conscience, as well as the melting pot of its most hidden and unpleasant instincts.

Furthermore, the protagonist develops a peculiar competence in applying to space and spatial elements in order to find out both metaphors and counterparts for his own changing situation, while his life actually is taking the right path thanks to meetings and exchange with new people. A survey of Finland leads him to consider Norway (at most) and other countries with an (apparently) speculative eye, so that Loe's novel is an impressive source of stereotypes about human behaviour and national cultures, with hints at strategies for the construction of place.

Finland suits the language of the novel, in my opinion, as it is the closest exotic country for Norwegians, both sharing common landscapes, climate, habits, and, meanwhile, displaying peculiarities. If the most striking feature of this work lies in its lively style, humoristic and naïve, its most relevant layer proves to be its work on stereotypes, on the construction of geographical images, and on the use of space not only as a background, but even and above all as an intriguing, active character in this grotesque, surreal and solipsistic story.