

Liz Wells
POETICS AND SILENCE

“The poetic image is not subject to an inner thrust. It is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away. Because of its novelty and its action, the poetic image has an entity and a dynamism of its own ...”ⁱ

Jorma Puranen explores history, culture, identity, and the poetics of language. He also explores aesthetics, particularly uses of light and shade. These interests overlap within his work. On the one hand he investigates ways in which the Arctic areas of Greenland and Lapland (Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia) and the Sámi people have been represented, historically and now. On the other hand, he reflects on image composition, aesthetics, and the construction of points of view. His enquiry thus encompasses art history, social anthropology, language and communication, geography, and Nordic identities. The approach is multilayered; he simulta-

neously explores visual phenomena, picture-making, and, for example, ethnographic attitudes or histories of the expeditions of northern explorers. His work is very frequently concerned with nature and the representation of northern landscapes, especially Lapland, a relatively silent and underpopulated region.

‘Nature’ is an evolving and holistic system that in many respects appears unfathomable. As humans we both form a part of it and, as has been made particularly evident in recent debates relating to climate change, have an impact on it. Geographic and botanical sciences are not new, but have been brought into focus this year, 2009, through celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, whose contribution to perceptions and debates about natural forces and the origins of species remains paramount. In line with many European predecessors, Darwin’s method of research involved voyage and exploration; observation, identification, and classification of phenomena; and, in his case, the testing of propositions relating to theories of evolution.

Along with painting and drawing, photography has been implicated historically in Western investigations of previously unfamiliar regions and phenomena. Fascination with ‘wilderness’ is shared by many. Hence exper-

ditions have been financed, journeys undertaken, camps set up, indigenous peoples scrutinized (or terrorized), and wildlife (animals as well as botanical and mineral specimens) collected for analysis and classification. The zoo, the ethnographic archive, and the nature museum have parallel histories within Western territorial expansion. Yet the wilderness of our imagination changes once we get there. Paradoxically, our very presence has an effect on the locations to which we travel, which by definition are no longer unknown to us and therefore no longer amenable to a geographic imaginary. Furthermore, that which we find never fits precisely with what we hoped or feared to encounter. One of the pleasures of the geographic imaginary is that the unfamiliar can be romanticized, generating a particular form of sublime reverie. While territories strange to us may remain unfathomable even though we are there, the actual experience generally introduces multiple sensations—pleasurable, awesome, or discomfiting—along with mundane questions to do with travel and orienteering, personal energy and sustenance, that render redundant fantasies previously indulged.

The concept of ‘north’ resonates complexly within this. As Peter Davidson remarks in his discussion of “the idea of north,” everyone carries a notion of