

Paper boat in rough waters

Heterotopia in Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen's novel Barbara

Pappírskátur í ringum sjógvi

Bergur Rønne Moberg

PhD. Dpd. of Scandinavian Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen

Email: moberg@hum.ku.dk

Abstract

The article analyzes the conflicting reality of place and modernity in Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen's Dan-Faroese novel *Barbara* (1939). The description of this breaking is based on Michel Foucault's conception of heterotopia. In the figure of heterotopia the traces crosses each other. The locality gets its dynamic by virtue of the way it acts on the stranger. The article will underline three examples of heterotopia in the novel: 1) the colony/place 2) the ship and 3) the novel 'itself' (e.g. the many Faroese expressions) with the ship *Fortuna* as the most important one. The article however considers heterotopia to be far more than just a Dan-Faroese contact zone. The changing times are being connected to modernity as a crisis for language and metaphysics. The heterotopia is expressed as a dynamic understanding for this crisis in both the interpretive space of art and in the space of action of modernity. The novel is explained as a critical commentary to the Enlightenment era which regarded the illusion and imagination to be a false view on things. In other words *Barbara* conveys a meaningful, inhabited modernity that functions as a correction to more rationalistic versions of modernity. *Barbara* is conceived as a writing-back from the periphery to European metropolises and modernity in order to give an account of the encounter with a world outside the main current of enlightenment. The main character, *Barbara* represents something other-worldly in terms of the 'barbaric' and untamable desire, that is released in contact with the outside world. The novel is itself challenged before it challenges the center and thus it opposes exoticism.

Úrtak

Henda greinin er ein viðgerð av røringinum millum stað og modernitet í donsku-føroysku skaldsøguni *Barbara* eftir Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen (1939). Lýsingin er grundað á hugtakið heterotopia hjá Michel Foucault. Í heterotopia umskarast spor frá tveimum ymsum heimum. Staðið verður til ein fundarstað, har dynamikkur kyknar upp á mótinum millum tað fremmanna og staðið. Greinin tekur fram trý dømi um heterotopia í skaldsøguni 1) hjáland/stað 2) skipið og 3) sjálv skaldsøgan (eitt nú tey nógvu føroysku tiltøkini í skaldsøguni), við serligum atlíti at skipinum *Fortuna*. Heterotopia verður lýst sum meira enn bert eitt danskt-føroyskt sambandsøki (*contact zone*). Broytingartíðirnar eru eisini settar í samband við modernitet sum kreppa í máli og metafysikki. Heterotopia-figururin umboðar eina dynamiska fatan av hesari kreppu bæði sum eina kreppu í tilsipingum til sjálva listina og í tilsipingum til modernitet sum virkisrúm. Skaldsøgan verður lögð fram sum ein kritisk viðmerking til upplýsingartíðina, ið vrakaði gyklaverk og hugflog sum eina falska áskoðan. Við øðrum orðum miðlar *Barbara* eina ímynd av einum innihaldsríkum moderniteti, ið roynist sum ein rættleiðing til meira rationalistiskar útgávur av modernitetinum. Í royndini at meta um, hvussu komið verður í samband við heimin uttan fyri tað upplýsingarliga meginrákið er *Barbara* hugsað sum eitt aftursvar (*writing-back*) frá útryðjuni til evropeiskan stórbýarmodernitet. Hetta svar fær skap sum ein afturundirgerð í einum upplýsingarávirkaðum meginráki. Høvuðspersónurin *Barbara* umboðar ein annan heim, sum bæði er ein ógrundaður longsul og ein ótamd 'barbarisk' girnd, ið slítur seg leysa, tá ið stað og modernaðar tíðir stoyta saman. Skaldsøgan er á henda hátt sjálv avbjóðað, áðrenn hon bjóðar 'miðdeplinum' av *Barbara* kann tískil eisini sigast at gera upp við eksotismu.

Barbara (1939) written by the author-historian Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen (1900-38) is one of the most well-known Dano-Faroese novels. *Barbara* was published in 1939, a year after Jacobsen's untimely death at age 37. It is his only work of fiction. Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen grew up within a Dano-Faroese community in Tórshavn on the Faroe Islands. The language of the Faroes first become a living literate language around the year 1900, and Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen has therefore been more comfortable writing in Danish than Faroese. For the same reason, one-third of all Faroese novels, including *Barbara*, are written in Danish.¹ As is the case with Indian and African literature, the greatest works of Faroese literature have been written in the language of the colonizers. The other great Dano-Faroese author is William Heinesen, and he and Jacobsen comprise the twin pillars of Faroese literature. The nerve in their writing is a heterogeneous strand of experience which communicates Faroese culture through an especially familiar distance.

Barbara takes place around the year 1760. The plot is a rather banal romantic intrigue written into a historical cultural framework. The framework is primarily an acute analysis of the differences between the old and the new society. This is the epic starting point for the encounter – and clash – between a pre-modern peasant culture and the beginning of modernity. The focal point of the novel is the Faroese woman Barbara and her relationship with the Danish priest Mr. Poul. Reflecting the etymology of her name, Barbara represents the 'barbaric', untameable desire that is unleashed in contact with the outside world.

The goal of this article² is to analyze the

novel's description of the conflicting realities of place using Michel Foucault's conception of heterotopia. Foucault's notion of heterotopia is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's term "chronotope", which literally means time-space. Chronotopes are Bakhtin's name for the most crucial mutual connection between time- and space-relations. Bakhtin distinguishes between real and literary chronotopes. In the latter the spatial and temporal characteristics melt together to a meaningful and concrete whole. The notion of heterotopia expresses the same tense integration of space and time as the chronotope.

The concept of heterotopia was first developed by Foucault in a 1967 lecture entitled "Of Other Spaces". Heterotopia emerges as an answer and as an alternative to utopia. In Foucault's lecture, we read that utopias – unlike heterotopias – are forever condemned to remain 'sites with no real place' (Foucault 1986: 24). A heterotopia is a kind of counter-site, in which the real sites, those that can be found in the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. In other words, they are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect (ibid.: 24).³

Heterotopia is not only a spatial concept but a linguistic one as well. It comes into being as the interference between representational and non-representational practices. This immanent interference occurs when a practice falls back upon itself and questions both itself and all other practices. It is precisely this movement toward itself that enables heterotopias to question and contest all other spaces.

In the article "Barbara and the Dano-Faroese Moment", Leyvoy Joensen connects Bakhtin's chronotope to Jacobsen's novel (Joensen 2000: 78). Where Joensen primarily attaches the hybridity of the novel to literary and cultural history, my analysis demonstrates how the novel celebrates the heterogeneous experience with reference to the problematic of representation in general and to literature in particular. In other words the figure of heterotopia in *Barbara* can also be read as a convergence between meaning and contingency.⁴

From Foucault's perspective, the ship is the heterotopia par excellence (Foucault 1986: 27). In *Barbara* as well, the most crucial heterotopia is the ship, named Fortuna. The Fortuna sails between the Faroes and Denmark, and when it arrives in the Faroese capital of Tórshavn, it sets the entire town in motion.⁵ In accordance with Foucault's idea of heterotopia, the Fortuna is represented as a counter-site that challenges the place and causes daily life to cease. Beginning with the message that the Fortuna is about to arrive vibrations are sent through the little community. These vibrations manifest themselves as external movements in the form of people being on the lookout, windows that open and people hastening down toward the beach. The otherwise slow rhythm of daily life in Tórshavn is abruptly interrupted by a more rapid rhythm and a festive mood. The ship arrives from another, larger world, a cause for both concern and excitement.

Through the movements of the Fortuna the novel reveals a discord between the temporal and the spatial dimension. The heterotopia of the novel is an answer to this division of modern times in terms of a

condensed communication between meaning and contingency. I read the novel's reaction to the process of modernity as an expression of an identity which is conflicting in a communicating way.

Throughout the novel the returning Fortuna is an image of an ambiguous modernity. The entry of the outside world in the small community creates a contact zone between two very different worlds: a local peasant culture and a modern European culture. In this way, the isolated world in the middle of the ocean becomes controlled by an unknown power, which is the modern Fortuna, i.e., the goddess of happiness and fate in the guise of modernity. The ship Fortuna shows the path forward toward a more easily moving, fluid world.

Mr. Poul arrives to the Faroes with the Fortuna at the beginning of the novel. His arrival demonstrates the anxiety and tension that the Fortuna creates in the little town. In the same way as the Fortuna gets life going in Tórshavn, the locality obtains its dynamic by virtue of the way it acts on the stranger. The turbulence which the Fortuna creates in the urban setting also continues in Mr. Poul as an inner anxiety. The novel is a drama of destiny, and the plot points inevitably forward toward instability. Mr. Poul is depicted as a young, promising theologian who is regarded as being well suited to 'restore peace and tranquillity and good habits' to the Faroe Islands (Jacobsen 1939: 35). However, the promising theologian becomes a victim of the anxiety generated by his relationship to Barbara. In the end, he stands to be 'judged to be defrocked for dereliction of office and desperate behaviour' (ibid: 211).

Mr. Poul's anxiety has its roots in the

Dano-Faroese zone of contact created by the Fortuna. But the anxiety is more than that of a new priest's alienation in the outlying Faroese wasteland. Through Mr. Poul, the Fortuna transforms the place into an emotional battlefield. The occasion is Barbara. With her spontaneity and lust for life, Barbara challenges all the established conventions and rules of Faroese society. She shocks her future husband, Mr. Poul, by misspelling the name 'Jesus', while he disappoints her by wanting God more than he does her. Barbara is the focal point of the entire novel, and especially the axis for Mr. Poul's romantic torments. Everyone gathers around Barbara, and she herself wants to be loved by everyone. Where Barbara loves too much, her men love her too little.

Barbara is described as nature, which can be fooled, but not disciplined. In order to characterize her, the narrator uses metaphors of nature, especially of the maritime kind. Mr. Poul constantly finds himself on rocky ground and he is compared with a paper boat in rough waters (*ibid.*: 143). The continually challenged Mr. Poul is an easily movable boat in Barbara's element, which is that of passion. It is a clash between two different worlds: Poul's Christian guilt feelings versus Barbara's Eros and spontaneity.

The clash between the notion of a modern and a pre-modern world also reveals itself in the language of the novel, which contains innumerable Faroese expressions. In linguistic terms, the novel is a decisive break between Faroese vernacular and a European language level in the form of learned discussions and Francophile terms. In this way, language also becomes a zone of contact between incompatible worlds. The result of the

encounter between the two widely different domains of experience is a place outside all places, which only can be represented in art. The many Faroese expressions represent the familiar distance in *Barbara* to the Faroese life-world. Heterotopic literature in general is a genuine part of a locality, but only by virtue of distance. In such cases, literature is local through its language, extrovert through its reflexion following a fertile challenge to every local self-understanding. *Barbara* reflects a heterotopia being more than a description of a certain, unconfusing place. On the one hand the notion of heterotopia as a site with no site dams up for the referential fallacy in reading the heterotopic site primarily as a reference to a concrete place. On the other hand there is no absolute boundary between art and non-art, between art and common human creation.

The novel demonstrates a precise description of the convergence between opposing worlds. Hence, the descriptions of the old and the new worlds reach far beyond the traditional realistic description. The novel's entire expression celebrates the encounter between two worlds. It is a special perspective on things, where Barbara becomes a symbol of the Atlantic periphery, simultaneously representing that which is incorporated into the project of modernity and that which evades it. The representational energy of the novel develops from the narrator's sharp reflection on the gap between modernity and the surplus of meaning: "The heterotopia of the ship produces a language that gravitates toward nether world of the nonrepresentational and that operates at the edge of its own dissolution" (Casarino 2002: 15f).

In the final analysis, it is not only about progress, but also about destiny and identity. Barbara's essence gives birth to a cascade of questions about the insecure foundation of identification. For example, it is asked, 'Who is Barbara?' (Jacobsen 1939: 133). The novel answers this question without answering by saying that she lights up with her dress of many colours and high spirit, and that this game finally ends at a point (ibid.: 134). Barbara is the force of life and a grand illusion in a world of salt and darkness.

But as a character, Barbara is also challenged by the movements caused by the Fortuna. She would not have been who she is if the priests had not come to the Faroes. And at the end of the novel, she makes a failed attempt to reach the Fortuna, which is heading toward Copenhagen with her lover Andreas on board. Barbara thus fails in her attempt to satisfy the demands for change imposed on her by modernity. Just like Mr. Poul she is a victim of the oncoming modernity, which as an anonymous power moves things and people around. In the meantime, however, the narrator has idealized her so strongly that it is primarily the uncaptured nature of her essence which is left behind. The point, however, is the breach between the modern and that which cannot be modernized. The connotations of the wildness contained in the name Barbara reflect an oncoming modern gaze upon her as Other. But this gaze should be seen as a reference to a world which cannot be modernised and represented, rather as than an objectivising, colonizing gaze on the Atlantic world. The novel underlines this through Mr. Poul as an unfinished subjectivity, who in advance is not stable enough to create the Other as a

counter image. I therefore see the colonial contact zone of the novel as a part of a general modern context rather than as a relation of power between colonialists and the colonized.⁶

As a symbol of inexpressible experience the Barbara-figure is not only challenged, but also challenges the modern gaze on itself. The world of Barbara in other words does not allow itself to be demystified. It is the periphery that writes back to the Europe of metropolises in order to give an account of the encounter with another world which cannot be contained in words. But before the novel in this way challenges the center, it is itself challenged as representative for the periphery by a modern European consciousness. The novel's self-consciousness accords with Foucault's view of the ship in European literature. Foucault represents the ship as a heterotopia, from which the entire Western civilization is seen from outside. The sea narrative questions not only its own foundation but also reaches beyond itself to question the foundation of a world that for several centuries had been run in all sorts of ways by ships (Casarino 2002: 13). From the sixteenth century until the present, Foucault says, the ship has been not only the great instrument of economic development, but also the greatest reserve of the imagination. This is why Foucault characterises the ship as the heterotopia par excellence.

The district recorder Johan Hendrik Heyde is the character who most clearly represents the ship as symbol of development, fantasy and reflexion. Heyde is part of the Danish officialdom in Tórshavn and comes from an old family with lots of foreign blood in it, but well-rooted in the Faroes (Jacobsen

1939: 23). He however, distinguishes himself from the Danish bourgeois on the Faroes by being 'in tune with the people' (ibid.: 50). Heyde represents the interference of heterotopia between two worlds. The district recorder is the novel's learned, wise character and appears on the scene in the scholarly discussions with Mr. Poul. He is Mr. Poul's counsellor in existential matters. The district recorder gives advice in a context where the meaning in wisdom and advice can no longer protect against anxiety and upheaval. The advice he offers is not a completely formed foundation, but a wisdom of uncertainty. The district recorder believes that everything is illusion and vanity, including the wisdom he derives from books. The distance to the bookish learning can also be read as a discrete thematization of the novel itself as an imperfect form compared with life, incarnated in Barbara. Even an authoritative expression such as literature and wisdom is thus not sufficient to confront those powers that govern human life and the world. The district recorder admits that he uses wisdom to protect himself against life. He hereby emphasizes the limited perspective of his wisdom – and of every standpoint and thereby all art – in relation to the unlimited and unpredictable reality. But the district recorder nevertheless has a sharp eye for human vanity, which he believes is the foundational driving force in the human being.

The wisdom, while inadequate, is acute enough to reveal shortcomings in the reason-governed world. The district recorder's wisdom is practical, dynamic and does not allow itself to be controlled by an abstract, rule-based reason. The district recorder

struggles for progress in terms of new fishing experiments and agricultural improvements, but his real passion is to bring ideas about the meaning of life and human edification into the new world. It is an attempt to console oneself to the modern by bringing in the undercurrent of contemplation into the main current of Enlightenment. The district recorder removes himself partly from the Enlightenment era for which he himself is spokesman. In this way the entire Western civilization is seen from the outside. According to Enlightenment philosophy, it was natural science that was especially suited to provide explanations that were free of prejudice, and a non-illusory orientation of reality (Hellesnes 2004: 91). But in the novel, these explanations are not sufficient. The district recorder has a sense for the grandeur of Barbara's illusion-filled world and for the loss when the glow that is Barbara begins to dim. It is not his longing back in time, but a critical commentary to that part of the Enlightenment era which regarded the illusion and imagination to be a false view of things. The district recorder is a symbolic figure of a meaningful, inhabited modernity that functions as a correction to more rationalistic versions of modernity.

The wisdom of the district recorder is beyond or somewhere in between fixity and change, and in the end it is an image of the privilege of a spiritual retirement underlined in the words that a philosopher never is totally shipwrecked (Jacobsen 1939: 139). As a member of a Dano-Faroese family he incarnates the notion of heterotopia e.g. the sense of interference in a contact zone. He represents place without place and thus a world beyond binarism.

I have explained the Fortuna as the most important heterotopia in the novel *Barbara*. The ship casts a multi-faceted light over art in particular and over modernity in general. The movements of Fortuna are being transmitted to Mr. Poul as a shaken and problematic individual and from there to the insufficiency of language. The change is being connected to modernity with its close link between the shaken individual and a corresponding crisis for language and metaphysics. As art, *Barbara* is a sea narrative similar to the nineteenth-century sea narrative, which falls back upon itself in the attempt to reflect on its floating and itinerant foundation, thereby calling itself into question as a form of representation (Casarino 2002: 13).

In terms of modernity in general, the ship is the heterotopia par excellence of Western civilization, going as far back as the Renaissance. The nineteenth-century sea narrative produced the matrix of the crisis of modernity. Such a matrix in these narratives was above all materialized as the space of the ship (*ibid.*).

The heterotopia in *Barbara* expresses a dynamic understanding for this crisis in both the interpretive space of art and in the space of action of modernity. The interference between two worlds was the pivotal point in Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen's life and writing. He described himself as a "national hermaphrodite" (Matras 1941: 30) and his background as a heterogeneous mixture of "old Faroese peasant blood" and a "talented Copenhagen-family" creating "a unique convergence in the mind" (Elbrønd-Bek 1986: 56). In his novel, Jacobsen attempted to include both of his worlds. This could be done only in artistic form, and he utilized his imagination of art to celebrate hybridity.

References

- Apelkvist, B. 1999. Dialogens existentiella rötter. Om Bachtin och den moderna litteraturteorin. *Horisont* 4. Arkmedia Vasa: 94-105. Stockholm.
- Bakhtin, M. 2006. *Rum, tid & historie. Kronotopens former i europæisk litteratur*. Translated by Harald Hartvig Jepsen. Klim. Århus.
- Bakhtin, M. 1994. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated and edited by Caryl Emerson. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Casarino, C. 2002. *Modernity at Sea. Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis*. University of Minnesota Press. Minnesota.
- Elbrønd-Bek, B. 1986. Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen – mellem tradition og modernitet *In: Bogens Verden* 2: 54-56.
- Foucault, M. 1986. Of other Spaces. Translated by Jay Miskowic. *Diacritics* 16: 22-27. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore.
- Hellesnes, J. 2004. *Illusjon*. Oslo.
- Jacobsen, J-F. 1939. *Barbara*. Copenhagen.
- Joensen, L. 2000. Barbara and the Dano-Faroese Movement. *Úthavsdagar. Oceaniske dage*: 64-87. Tórshavn.
- Matras, C. 1941. Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen. *Gyldendals Julebog*: 30-40. Copenhagen.
- Pratt, M-L. 1992. *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London.

Notes

- ¹ Lecture on Faroese literature by Malan Marnersdóttir on Norðurbryggjuni in Copenhagen 2006. According to Marnersdóttir 41 out of 118 Faroese novels in the period 1909-2006 are written in Danish.
- ² The article is an extended version of a lecture held at the 23. ICLA-Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 2007.
- ³ Foucault also mentions other heterotopic sites as cemeteries, mirrors, libraries, museums and places of contemporary relaxation as cafes, cinemas, and beaches. The actual background for reflecting on heterotopia is the experience of a world becoming still more simultaneous. We are in the epoch of simultaneity, Foucault says, and thus he underlines heterotopia as a product of the increasing networking and intersections of all kind.

In *Modernity at Sea*, Cesare Casarino states that 'heterotopias as a form of spatial representation comprise a discursive and a nondiscursive aspect, a mimetic and a nonmimetic aspect' (Casarino 2002: 12).

⁴ My use of the figure of heterotopia indirectly continues the existential oriented interpretation of Bakhtin's work (Apelkvist 1999, Bakhtin 1994: 63). That means a sensitivity towards fundamental human aspects as fragility and the longing for unity.

⁵ In the chapter "Verden" the arrival of three French warships in Tórshavn gives rise to similar reactions.

⁶ In her book *Imperial Eyes* Mary-Louise Pratt describes the conception "contact zone" as areas that allow the intermingling of two or more cultures. Contact zones are a social space of encountering and clash between disparate cultures often determined by relations of power in cases of colonialism, slavery etc. Pratt emphasizes the political implications of these zones without leaving out of account that the zones are interactive and the individual constituted in and by these zones.