

Water's Three States in an Antarctic Traveler's Mind

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Abstract

Antarctica Ahoy by Juhan Smuul (1922–1971) is a remarkable travel book in the context of Estonian literature as well as in the framework of the literary treatment of the polar areas. The diary of a voyage from the Baltic Sea to the coast of Antarctica, a two-month stay on the sixth continent, and the passage back to Europe via Australia and Africa, the book also illuminates the author's most intimate symbols, beliefs, and aspirations. This study focuses on the images of water in its fluid, solid, and vaporous forms in *Antarctica Ahoy*, pointing out some of the culture-specific features of experiencing and conceptualizing water in extreme environments, emphasizing the perspectives of a Baltic writer and researcher.

Juhan Smuul has been recognized as one of the masters of verbal seascape in Estonian literature. As a writer who came from a historical fishing village on an Estonian island, Smuul was particularly fascinated by water, especially the sea, and his writings attach powerful symbolic meanings to all forms of water, including ice, fog, and the sea itself.

Keywords

Juhan Smuul, *Antarctica Ahoy*, sea literature, travel writing,
nature aesthetics, Estonian literature

The extreme environments that have lured the adventurous for centuries are often defined by their relationship to water—by its absence, as in deserts, or by its overwhelming presence (sometimes in the form of snow and ice), as in the cases of polar landscapes and oceans. But as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, until the mid-twentieth century, whether places were hot or cold received far greater scientific attention than whether they were dry or wet (141).

In the contemporary world, human awareness of water as a problem almost goes without saying. In recent years, water has violently figured in the lives of numerous people in the forms of floods, hurricanes, and tsunamis. The effects of climate change on oceans and glacial areas are one of the central topics of the current Fourth International Polar Year.¹ A shift in consciousness regarding sea ecosystems as fragile rather than inexhaustible has been observed in nature writing since Rachel Carson (Buell 201). However, the global political urge to claim and possess yet-unexploited natural resources seems to have escalated rather than decreased recently. It is possible to tackle these problems also in literary analysis, and that is the purpose of this study.

There is a well-established canon of polar writers whose diaries and reflections continue to inspire new trips and new texts. Yet, in the framework of this relatively compact tradition, each writer experiences, confronts, and describes such particular landscapes, heavily relying on his or her own cultural background. An immediate polar experience is predominantly a bodily rather than an intellectual task. The earliest memories related to home, sense of comfort, the degree of having previously been acquainted with harsh environmental conditions, and one's ability to adapt to the stress arising from difficult natural and intellectual conditions, among other factors, often help writers conceptualize such an experience. At the same time, polar explorations are no doubt highly political and very expensive undertakings, and writers are compelled to consider this perspective, too.

In the following analysis, I will focus on Estonian writer Juhan Smuul's ocean and polar experience, especially the tension between the personal, bodily, ideological, and religious dimensions of such experience. In the introductory part of the article, I will discuss the circumstances in which *Antarctica Ahoy!* (AA)² was written, as well as its form and sources of inspiration. Next I will explore the images of water, fog, and ice in association with the color/shade gradations dark, grey, and white. This threefold combination can be followed throughout Smuul's oeuvre; it conveys his philosophical ideas and reveals how they have been molded

¹ See more at <<http://www.ipy.org>>

² The book title is hereafter abbreviated as AA in the parenthetical documentation.

by his earliest childhood memories. Finally, the religious motives and allusions associated with the ocean in *Antarctica Ahoy!* are touched upon. The article attempts to offer a glimpse into the mental world of a Baltic traveler and writer, in order to point out the culturally conditioned diversity of water- and ice-related experiences.

The Roots of the Book

Estonian writer Juhan Smuul (1922–1971) wrote one of his most widely acknowledged and translated works, titled in translation as *Antarctica Ahoy! The Ice Book* (originally published in Estonian as *Jäine raamat* in 1959; English translation from Russian in 1963), during the escalation period of the Cold War. He received a high Soviet state award, the Lenin Prize, for publicist prose in 1961 for it. Subsequently, the book was translated into more than twenty languages. The book continues to be one of the most outstanding books in Estonian travel literature.³

In the framework of the Soviet Marxist literary criticism that dominated the era when *Antarctica Ahoy!* was published, travel writing was regarded as a sub-genre of the journalistic feature story. Its ideological ends, not its structural features or its relation to other literary genres, were the main concern of the so-called “directive criticism” (Tavel 419). In the current study, I approach *Antarctica Ahoy!* as an “exploration narrative” (Bryson 32-53) that can be regarded a certain subsection of travel literature. Thus, a wider possibility of interpretation is opened up. The author’s exploratory activities can be regarded as directed toward inner as well as outer landscapes (Lopez 61-71).

William C. Horne has outlined two traditions of arctic literature which he calls the exploratory and metaexploratory traditions. He makes this distinction on a historical basis as well as according to different thematic emphases: the exploratory tradition features continuous conflicts between the explorers’ visions and actual conditions, whereas the metaexploratory tradition produces ideologically focused nature descriptions (78). On the historical plane, *Antarctica Ahoy!* should fall into the category of metaexploratory narratives. In terms of content, the classification appears to be complicated. It is difficult to determine whether the text belongs to the

³ It must be remarked that travel writing as a genre appeared in Estonian original literature only in the beginning of the 20th century. The literary heritage of the great 19th century explorers of Baltic German origin, Krusenstern, Bellingshausen, Wrangel among others, remained a separate tradition.

tradition of surprising discoveries or to the tradition of ideological construction of environments. This is a question to be further addressed in the following analysis.

Michael A. Bryson makes an analogous attempt to separate the Antarctic exploration and scientific efforts into two historical phases. Calling these the “Heroic Age” and the age of “big science,” Bryson places the American polar explorer Richard Byrd at the turning point of these two eras. The shift is recursively indicated by the fact that “[i]n their [the earlier explorers’] case, survival—not science—became the primary focus of activity while traveling” (36). Smuul was neither a scientist nor a heroic pursuer of the unknown. However, in his initial approach, Smuul differs from many travel writers for his attempt to be a sailor rather than a tourist, an explorer rather than a passive onlooker, a doer rather than a writer. According to Bryson’s classification, *Antarctica Ahoy!* would be described as falling into the period after Byrd, while the text also reveals characteristics of the “Heroic Age” in exploration literature.

The habit of being engaged in “real” life is characteristic of the oeuvre of Juhan Smuul. He was born to a relatively poor islander family on Muhu Island off the coast of Estonia, in the Baltic Sea. Smuul could not fulfill his juvenile dream of becoming a sailor, having to quit school after the primary grades to help his elderly father on the family farm. In 1941 he was drafted into the Soviet army, where he started his literary endeavors. After WWII he gained popularity first as a poet and later as a storyteller and playwright. He became one of the leading Soviet Estonian authors, the head of the Estonian Writers’ Union, and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The impact of the native environment on Smuul’s literary production has been emphasized by critics as well as by the author himself; echoes of the Estonian landscape repeatedly surface in *Antarctica Ahoy!*, too.

In his firsthand clarifications of the sources of inspiration for the Antarctic travel, Smuul mentions several authors and books that have fueled his wish to see distant seas and ice-covered lands. In *Antarctica Ahoy!* Smuul lists, among his other personal belongings, nine books that he has taken aboard the ship with him, mostly by polar explorers; among them are Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen’s *Across Greenland on Skis* (1938), American Richard Byrd’s *The Flight to the South Pole* (1939), and Briton Ernest Shackleton’s *The Heart of the Antarctic* (1934), as well as an abridged popular science book for Estonian schools on the Poles (1930). He mentions reading Nansen’s book during the voyage, and he quotes at length from Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s last diary. Smuul especially admires Nansen’s *Across Greenland* for the bravery of the endeavor and for Nansen’s sense of humor as well

as for his literary abilities, “[f]or, if anyone has understood the heart of the ice, it is Nansen” (*Of People* 214).

The Nordic Nansen must have indeed been familiar with ice and snow from his early childhood. *Across Greenland* indicates that he addresses such as a normal environment to be tackled, not as something merely to contemplate—unlike Byrd, who in his *Alone* appears to be in search of an utterly private contact with polar wilderness (that eventually proves nearly lethal). Tuan has remarked that Nansen and Byrd stand out with their writings as the most philosophical polar explorers (148). Both were of major importance to Smuul, although Smuul’s environmental sensibility is closer to Nansen’s than to Byrd’s, aimed at survival rather than an experience of the sublime. In *Antarctica Ahoy!*, Nansen is quoted seven times; Richard Byrd is referred to and quoted six times in total. Smuul relates his fascination with Southern oceans with Byrd (AA 51).

Byrd’s endeavor at Advance Base is indeed driven by the spirit of the heroic conquest. It is also an excellent illustration of the cliché of “man and wilderness eye to eye” that is often exploited in contemporary mass culture, although Smuul’s position in regard to the heroic conquest imagery is rather self-ironic. Here is how he describes his arrival upon continental Antarctica:

On the historical fourth of January, the representative of Estonian nation and its writers landed on the continent of Antarctica. . . . His lips were swollen, the skin was peeling from his face, his nose was red, and he was cold. Bravery, decisiveness, a firm will to conquer the sixth continent, and other overwhelming feelings filled his heart. (AA 114-15)⁴

One of the most significant moments when a text of the polar literature and the author’s immediate experience in Antarctic coincide is described in the journal entry of January 20, on a stormy day in Mirny station. Smuul reads the last entries of Robert Scott’s diary, and comments:

All of this is familiar, I have read it before. But it is one thing to read Scott in the quiet and peace of one’s home in Tallinn, and another to read it here, after having nearly missed my door in the heavy snow blizzard, and

⁴ As the English translation has been made on the basis of the somewhat deficient Russian one, the outcome deviates from the Estonian original in many ways. Therefore, quotations have been modified by the author of the present article in order to render the ideas and style of expression of the original as closely as possible. Citations are made according to the pagination of *Antarctica Ahoy!* (1963).

having an Antarctic snow storm roaring not behind the lines, but behind the very wall. (AA 142)

A shelter may easily turn into a prison in harsh polar conditions, as Byrd's experiment indicates. For Smuul, however, this was not the case. The experience of almost getting lost in an Antarctic blizzard was vividly recalled even after several years when Smuul published a poem on the same theme, "White Darkness," in 1961. The blizzard as a symbol of disorientation and confusion, and the color white as an emblem of the deadly, are discussed below in the section devoted to Smuul's color symbolism.

It must be said that the authors I've been discussing, as well as others to whom Smuul refers here and there, served Smuul first and foremost as inspirations, not as writers whose textual strategies Smuul tried to imitate. The closest Smuul came to imitation may be in starting his diary with an inventory of the belongings he brought on the trip, which parallels the list of goods Robert Scott describes in his expedition to the Southern continent.

Barry Lopez, in his discussion of inner and outer landscapes, argues that the outer, scientifically describable landscape has an impact on one's inner landscape that is a product of one's intellectual and spiritual development. A storyteller attempts to narrate the outer landscape to an audience in a plausible manner, along lines that "ring true" for his or her own community (66). What comes across as plausible differs from culture to culture, as well as from one historical era to another, and Smuul's work is a good illustration of this. As the author explains, *Antarctica Ahoy!* is a genuine diary, kept consistently day by day, "simply writing up everything [he] saw" (*Of People* 210).

Diary Form

Ülo Tonts has remarked in his monograph on Smuul, "[a]t the end of the fifties when *Antarctica Ahoy!* was born, the structural principle of integrating the story of the actual writing process into the literary work itself, was quite novel in Estonian, as well as in the Soviet literature as a whole" (174). The fact that *Antarctica Ahoy!* was simultaneously a literary work and the story of its writing was unusual for its composition as well as for its brave sincerity. Expressing one's personal ideas concerning highly politicized matters such as the Soviet scientific agenda in Antarctica was by no means a safe thing to do. Yet Smuul succeeded.

The diary form is a textual strategy that has not enjoyed wide critical attention, as Estonian researcher Leena Kurvet-Käosaar points out in her doctoral thesis (11). Before feminist studies of the topic, the diary had generally been considered a (feminine) genre that belonged to the private sphere, together with other liminal textual types of “little literary value,” such as meditations, letters, chronicles, descriptions of nature and travel among others. Canadian literary theorist Robert Fothergill regards the diary as a form enabling the transmission of public genres into the private sphere and vice versa (3). In this regard, *Antarctica Ahoy!* is an exemplary case, as it brings political matters into the journal’s private sphere and at the same time generalizes the author’s daily experiences into a narrative that has relevance on a wider, inter-subjective, and intercultural plane.

The notion of “documentary prose” instead of “diary” has been used in critical analyses of *Antarctica Ahoy!* by Smuul’s contemporaries. Tonts, in his classification of Estonian nonfiction, distinguishes between “objective” and “subjective documentary prose,” and proposes that Smuul’s *Antarctica Ahoy!* is an outstanding example of the latter. In the case of subjective documentary prose, the writer’s primary attention is on the reflection of his or her subjective responses to the environment (*Documentary* 30). The focus of such writing, or near the focus of attention, is the author himself. The admiration of the author as the main character of his book was expressed by a number of readers who responded with letters to Juhan Smuul after the publication of the Russian translation. This accords with Tuan’s remark that it is a modern desire of polar explorers to make their voyages into the geographically unknown terrain also voyages of self-discovery (152).

As Smuul’s knowledge of technical and science matters was rudimentary, the objective descriptions inevitably remain somewhat superficial compared with more personal observations. That is a shortcoming Smuul regretfully admits here and there throughout his diary as well as in his later comments on the theme. However, as a reviewer explains, Smuul might have held his hands in front of the scientific instruments, but with the tools a writer carries along “in his head and in his heart,” he has been able to record different, and by no means less valuable, data about Antarctica (Nirk 1106).

Literary historian Rutt Hinrikus, who has compared the manuscript contained in Smuul’s three notebooks titled *Sea Notebook* kept during the trip to the final version of the book, has noted that surprisingly few changes have been made to the printed version of the text (264). The diary form as a very personal way of keeping record of one’s own responses to the environment, does not, in principle, allow much room for imitation. Smuul himself admitted that if he had had some of the

more scientific accounts of the Antarctic ready at hand during the voyage and stay in Mirny, he would probably have been seriously tempted to use, cite, and copy these works in his own manuscript, because “[t]hese give a reader, but especially the author himself, a feeling of confidence and a sense that one is smarter than one actually is” (*Of People* 211-12).

Scott Slovic has analyzed the causes and effects of using the diary form in nature writing. He points out that the temporal aspect is crucial to any experience of nature, as well as to its literary rendering. Making regular notes helps the writer to establish a steady connection with the natural environment, and it also makes the descriptions more plausible and trustworthy for the reader. “For the reader, the journal form in nature writing (either the private journal or the various kinds of modified journals and anecdotal essays) produces a vicarious experience of the author’s constant process of inspecting and interpreting nature, and heightens the reader’s awareness of the author’s presence in nature,” Slovic writes (355). This logic serves well to explain the warm response of readers to Smuul’s *Antarctica Ahoy!* Following the writer step by step through his diary entries, readers are able to think of themselves as the travel companions of the author who does not conceal his own inner struggles in difficult moments.

As a narrative of self-discovery, *Antarctica Ahoy!* would be classified as belonging to the “exploratory” tradition of polar writing. On the other hand, as a member of a Soviet scientific expedition, Smuul—willingly or not—produces ideologically conditioned descriptions of the polar environment. All in all, the personal aspects of the book associated with its diary form still prevail over the “metaexploratory” ones. A good example of this is the fact that never throughout the book does Smuul mention the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58, which formed the complex official framework of the third Soviet Antarctic expedition. I will now offer a closer investigation of the author’s personal, sensory experiences with fog, ice, and water.

Dark, Grey, and White

In-depth analyses of Smuul’s literary style (Peegel), mythological thinking (Kalda), and ornithological knowledge (Tüür) have shown that Smuul’s work clings to a great degree to the language, beliefs, and knowledge he acquired in his childhood and as a young man in Muhu.

Regarding the issues of metaphor creation and language usage, Juhan Peegel observed that Smuul was inclined to use Muhu dialect and special expressions

typical to coastal fishermen. Smuul added a strong local timbre to his texts by deriving fresh metaphors based on his rural common sense. One of the peculiarities of this writing style is the spontaneous syntax that accommodates the rushing of the author's thoughts, the heaping of epithets, the repetition of similar thoughts in different words (as if looking for the right phrases during the actual writing), and the use of paragraph-long sentences. Much of this eccentric writing style has been lost in translations.

Yet the fact that Smuul uses surprisingly few colors in his text is something that would be difficult to alter in translation. Maie Kalda has pointed out Smuul's usage of color gradation, the shades of which only contain black (or darkness), grey, and white (638). *Antarctica Ahoy!* is a particularly interesting text to examine in order to understand Smuul's color symbolism in connection with the different states of water—sea and ocean, fog and snowstorm, ice and snow. There is a strong correspondence between color shades, states of water, and the symbolic-emotional value of each. A matrix containing the threefold components can be presented as follows.

[Table 1]

Water's State	Color Shade	Symbolic Value
Sea, ocean	Dark	Friendly, positive
Fog, blizzard	Grey	Hostile, confusing
Ice, snow	White	Deadly, negative

In her analysis, Kalda shows how the emphasis on greyness in Smuul's work has resulted in one of the author's most notable mythologized literary figures, The Great Grey, or the sea sadness. She also points out the importance of bodily sensations associated with this color scheme. "Grey" is a word that is generally used in (archaic) Estonian not only for color, but also as something related to the sense of coldness (suggesting "frost") or to indicate sickness and shivering (denoting fever).

These connotations are important in Smuul's usage of "grey" as well. For Smuul, grey offers a multi-sensory complex of meanings that often result in utter disorientation and confusion, the loss of a clear horizon in a literal as well as a

metaphorical sense. Kalda notes that the Great Grey appears in Smuul's oeuvre first in 1955, after his first longer seafaring experience on a herring trawler (637). The ambivalent nature of the Great Grey is a sign of Smuul's mental growth, Kalda claims, because it shows him overcoming the mental grid of binary oppositions of good-bad and like-dislike that had characterized his early poems and speeches. However, a strong sense of opposing extremities surrounding the ambivalent "middle" is present in the above-introduced matrix. White is deadly, and there is no alternative to this interpretation in Smuul. In the same manner, Smuul almost always adds "dark" to the description of sea water as a positive quality. Dark waters are beautiful, whereas grey waters create sadness. In the following discussion, the proposed framework is applied in the analysis of water's three states in *Antarctica Ahoy!*.

Fog

Personified fog, the Great Grey, is one of the most eloquent parts of Smuul's mythology. In *December, Sea of Japan* (1963), Smuul starts the characterization of the Great Grey as follows:

The Great Grey, Sea Sadness—shapeless, faceless and eyeless; centuries old and ever re-born from the milky wall of fog, from the swashing of waves, from the grey clouds above one's head, it walks as a ghost along the long, softly lighted ship corridors, ascends and descends the steep staircases, about to pick a cabin to enter and a human, in whom there would be space temporarily available for it. (*December* 618)

In *Antarctica Ahoy!* the shaping process of the metaphor can be observed. Grey fog, low visibility, the utter sense of disorientation, and the feeling of the loss of borders of one's self give evidence of the looming presence of the Great Grey. After more than a month of seafaring, Smuul concludes his diary entry: "It is half-raining, half-snowing. The visibility—both in my soul and at the sea—is low." (AA 83)

The clear vision of what lies ahead in the spatial as well as the temporal sense is of essential importance for the author. Fog accompanies Smuul's difficult moments of decision. After having made the decision to remain in Antarctica for several weeks, he ends the day by gazing at the fog-covered, empty ocean on the ship's bridge. The mood of the entry is hesitant, as the "visibility in his soul" is low

once again. The situations in which the author has to wait for something for an unspecified period of time appear in fog: for example, when he has to remain on board the ship, but the other members of the scientific expedition are sent to the continent upon their arrival to Antarctica; or when on the way back the ship's destination harbor is not announced. These are situations where excitement is mingled with disappointment and hesitancy, unsure states of mind.

Fog closes up the horizon; it confuses. The monotony and still air are the gravest enemies of the writer; death peers through the cold silence. Smuul did not hold existentialist ideas in high esteem, but in connection with fog and the Great Grey, situations where it would be appropriate to talk of "existentialism," such feelings occur. The Great Grey makes everything, including the author, feel useless, subject to self-pity and to the urge to let go of life.

A side-effect of fog as a meteorological phenomenon is the muffling of all noises. Silence is another recurrent enemy of the writer. There is no abundance of sounds in Smuul's texts, but he takes special note of the unnatural silence. On board the half-empty *Kooperatsia*, silence develops into an intense metaphor: "It [the silence] is like an evil person in a hat that makes one invisible, stretching his cold hand in through the cabin window and grasping your throat. It is a physically sensed silence, a white river of time, and this river has a slippery bottom" (AA 107).

Here, however, the greyness and disorientation of fog are already replaced by the white, icy deadliness—the sense of perishing that is close at hand and without ambivalence. This is a condition that brings Smuul's Antarctic experience closer to that of Richard Byrd: the sense that Antarctic ice is a huge sink that drains one of all life. Ice does not give; it only takes (Bryson 46). Smuul repeats this idea in a number of eloquent passages.

Ice

A special stylistic feature of Juhan Smuul's work is the use of rich bodily metaphors in his texts, as noted by Peegel (462). In this regard, the very title of the book is where the trouble in translating Smuul's literary style starts. The Estonian title, *Jäine raamat*, should literally be translated as *Icy Book* (it has been translated as *Ice Book* for the excerpts published in such magazines as *Soviet Literature*, 1961, and *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, 1962). The word "jäine," derived from the noun "jää" for "ice," is an adjective describing a bodily sense of cold, as well as slipperiness. It creates associations with Estonian expressions such as "icy breath of death," "hands cold as ice," "in an icy voice," and "cold, icy politeness." Emotionally, the word

conveys negative, awkward feelings toward something that is feared as well as respected. It is a word related to human feelings, not just to the fact that the travel destination, Antarctica, happens to be covered with ice. It must be admitted, though, that the title of the English translation of Smuul's book fails to convey any of these connotations. Replacing an expression of personal style with an English colloquialism, conveying (false) familiarity instead of cautious respect, blocks the reader from understanding the true tone of the work from the very beginning (Pöks 244-45).

Technically, only a third of the whole book is devoted to Smuul's stay in Antarctica, where he comes into actual, close contact with water in its frozen forms, snow and ice. However, the impression that this physical presence of the huge, cold masses of solid water has left with the writer is reflected in the choice of the book's title. The coldness of the continent contrasts with Smuul's descriptions of the warm, friendly nature of the people who work on the ice—the scientists, workmen, pilots, and others.

Tuan has interpreted the fascination with polar areas covered with ice as an unrecognized desire for death (147). It may hold true in Smuul's case. As for Smuul's relationship with ice in the text of the book, it is often personified. He regards ice in Antarctica almost as a mythological creature that may be huge and shapeless, impossible to be embraced or understood on a human scale, but that is certainly equipped with its own character and aims. The metaphor of grey, merciless, cold eyes of ice that call the writer back to the polar areas in an imperative mood, appears in *Antarctica Ahoy!* as well as in the last paragraph of Smuul's *Autobiography* (309). It is significant that the autobiography was first written in 1965 and rewritten in 1969, but the last paragraph has not been altered. It seems that the haunting sense of being followed, or watched over, by ice has been a very important component of Smuul's post-Antarctic self.

A strong wilderness-related cliché in literature is “[t]o commune with nature . . . [t]o be alone with nature” (Kirwan 224). Solitude in natural settings is believed to give one access to the contemplation of the greatness of nature and to the experience of the sublime. Such a conscious search for the sublime is practically missing in Smuul. As such contemplation requires an admiration of nature from a distance, it would be difficult to pursue it in polar conditions where the maintenance of one's bodily integrity is prioritized over all other activities. Smuul's visit to Antarctica lies somewhere on the historical “border area” of Bryson's “Heroic Age” and the age of “big science.” *Antarctica Ahoy!* shows more evidence of the struggle

for survival characteristic of the Heroic Age that leaves little space for the search for the sublime.

The feeling of awe in confrontations with nature is still not entirely missing in *Antarctica Ahoy!*. The sense of the closeness of icy death grows more and more prominent as the ship approaches the ice barrier. Smuul was definitely aware of the fact that during the previous Soviet polar expedition, a slice of the ice barrier had broken off and fallen onto the ship “Lena,” killing two members of the crew (Kreem 76). As the “icy breath of the Antarctic” becomes physically perceptible, the writer’s anxiety grows, too (AA 89).

In his description of penetrating the coastal ice on the 21st of December, Smuul depicts ice that shakes the ship as “some Antarctic creature who has grasped the sides and the keel of the ship into its icy, invisible hands” (AA 95). Beyond this coastal ice, there lies “the continent of Antarctica, earth buried in ice” (AA 96), and over this, “the endless shroud of snow” (*Icy* 117).⁵

For Smuul, a farmer’s son, earth covered with eternal ice is a symbol of utter infertility, an irreversible loss hard to overcome and even harder to understand. No physical contact with the land is actually possible. Upon encountering icebergs, Smuul likens them, among other things, to rigid brides for very old men. The highly gendered metaphors in relation with new “virgin” lands are characteristic of the 19th-century narratives of exploration. Bryson points out that this discursive strategy simply does not apply in Antarctica: “The land-as-female metaphor gives way to the notion of The Ice as energy and information sink; the ice, wind, and total darkness of Byrd’s world preclude anything but respect for the incredible power of nature and the imperative to survive” (48). In Smuul’s case, the emphasis in regard to Antarctic terrain is on the regret of its “uselessness” in an agricultural sense—i.e., in the “fertilizing,” not the “conquering,” of the female Earth.

Smuul tries to describe the inaccessibility of the Earth of Antarctica in terms of the physical weight of the glacier. While flying above Antarctica a couple of weeks later, he remarks:

Unwillingly one starts to think, how deep the earth must be buried beneath this ice, and what kind of earth that might be, whether it is stone, rock or gravel, what lay hidden in its depths and how long has that icy sleep already lasted? Only one firm feeling remains—that of the enormous weight that the masses of ice force upon every single square inch of it. (AA 130)

⁵ Unfortunately, this metaphor has been omitted in English translation.

The bodily sensations connected with the images of ice grow stronger toward the end of the author's stay in Antarctica. The landscape gradually becomes more familiar and more intelligible for him.

As "Koooperatsia" slowly moves away from the shores of Antarctica, Smuul's feelings merge with those of the ship: "From time to time, she brushed against the floating ice with her side, the ship shivered lightly, and I felt the same ice that scarred her iron was sharply cutting into my thoughts" (AA 182). This sensation accords with Smuul's most intimate feelings, as shortly thereafter it turns out that a letter from his wife has intentionally been withheld from him. It is, however, a very typical feature in Smuul's texts to describe psychological feelings in association with some bodily sensations, such as pain, scraping, scratching, gnawing, embracing, bitterness, hardness, brightness, cleanness, sense of warmth, softness and so on (Peegel 465-66). The process of "interiorization" of the landscape had been going on throughout the writer's stay in Antarctica, and finally Smuul even manages to synchronize his own feelings with the nature of the continent. This is a result of intense engagement, not of the distant observing that might have come from a search for the sublime.

Taskscape

The British anthropologist Tim Ingold has theorized the concept of "taskscape" (198). He makes a distinction between landscape that is visible and taskscape that is audible, connected with tasks performed by agents and social time, a complex of movements of dwelling produced in the process of living and social interaction. "Taskscape" is a concept that helps to explain Smuul's relationship with the continent of Antarctica, as well as with the sea. He was engaged in all the daily activities and tasks that needed to be performed by the members of the expedition, both onboard the ship and in Antarctica. Through these activities, the sixth continent, although it seemed barren and void to Smuul due to its qualities of iciness, cold, and whiteness, soon became filled with meaningful work for him. Besides describing the landscapes of Antarctica, he pays a lot of attention to the taskscapes—the daily work of the people in polar stations.

"A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there—to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage," Ingold writes (192). A juxtaposition of landscape and taskscape occurs in Smuul's description of his first flight above the continent of

Antarctica. In the plane the men are sitting closely together, they make tea and fried potatoes that taste exactly like the ones made in Estonian villages and eat them straight from the frying pan. This creates a cozy, although somewhat nomadic, sense of home. The usual everyday chores are performed, even while flying above the glacier. Smuul concludes by describing his emotions of the day: "It was my first glance on the face of the inner Antarctica. It is great, cold, merciless, lifeless, monotonous, and terribly beautiful" (AA 133). But still the overall impression of the day is warm and full of life, as in the company of fellow humans one finds comfort from the "terrible beauty" of the unfamiliar terrain. Solitude is simply not a viable strategy in these particular environmental conditions.

The same logic is at work in Komsomolskaya Station. Smuul visits the station where four men are preparing to winter. Due to the station's location at 3,540 metres above sea level, the newcomers suffer from a lack of oxygen. Here the author's bodily sensations of headache, constant thirst, weakness, and nausea are accompanied by self-pity and sentimentality. The only remedy is work: men engage in collecting the fuel barrels thrown down from the airplanes, peel potatoes, prepare food, and receive approaching tractors. Upon his departure, Smuul squeezes his emotions toward these men into one single emphatic sentence:

Here you forget that you are surrounded by a snow-filled, cold open terrain where the blizzards are raging, you forget that within the reach of hundreds of kilometers there are no other living souls, you forget that within hundred meters from the cabin you can easily die in a polar night's blizzard, you forget that outside the door, cold iron burns your palm, you forget that these people in front of you have to survive the polar night, and you only see young, healthy fellows who love humor and a salty word, who are interested in life and who consider the ceiling of the Antarctic as an ordinary place of work and who tell you that there was no place for them in other continents. (AA 142)

As Smuul's descriptions of the environment shift more and more from landscapes to taskscapes and lived spaces, he starts to feel familiar in the Mirny Station and its surroundings. This gradually dissolves his nameless, subconscious fear before the huge masses of deadly white ice. When members of the expedition observe "Koopertsia" approaching the Mirny coast on February 12, Smuul identifies the location of the onlookers quite naturally as "the rock where the radio station, electric power plant, and repair workshop are located" (AA 181).

Here yet another of Smuul's attitudes that likens him to Nansen can be observed: in order to relieve the stress originating from the harsh environmental conditions, one needs to treasure and enjoy the tiniest moments of comfort shared with fellow human beings.

Ocean

In his discussion of oceans and whales as literary symbols, Lawrence Buell remarks that the sea is the most ancient of our global commons, being the most widely spread environment on the Earth as well as the origin of all life on it (199). In the human imagination, the ocean has been reflected as possessing "mysterious, radical, ambiguous otherness" (203).

Smuul is one of the most recognized masters of verbal seascape in Estonian literature. His depictions of the ocean in *Antarctica Ahoy!* include a strong physical aspect. Smuul mentions the bitter taste of saltiness in his mouth and the omnipresent noise of ocean waves that fills all the rooms in the ship; he describes getting soaking wet on a stormy day, the sense of swaying on the ocean as contrasted to the motionlessness of the firm ground. The bodily contact with water gives an extra dimension to the understanding of this part of nature, uncontrollable by humans.

For Smuul, the sea is far from being a mysterious "other." He is an author whose expressions and metaphors are often specifically bound to his native cultural context. For example, the first contact with the big open sea in *Antarctica Ahoy!* contains a euphemism "[t]here's a hare in the sea" (The English translation does not render it well, however.). Coastal people have numerous taboo words related to water and fishing. It is believed that it does not bring good luck if one refers to "sensitive" phenomena directly. So, instead of saying "there's strong wind and there are foamy crests on the waves," a cautious Estonian coastal fisherman would use the metaphor of hares running on the surface of the sea. Smuul applies this local tradition to the Northern Sea with a great degree of self-confidence, expecting his reader to be familiar with this Estonian style of expression.

Some of Smuul's unexpected and amusing rural comparisons have, fortunately, "survived" the double translation filter (Estonian to Russian, Russian to English). In the tropical latitudes of the Atlantic Ocean, a swimming pool is built aboard "Kooperatsia" and filled with salty ocean water. After a dip in the pool, everybody becomes covered with salt: "A weird thought came across my mind—how delighted calves would be to lick all the men who stroll and steam on the

forecastle after a bath. Calves, then, love salt” (AA 41). Several of Smuul’s sisters worked in their native village collective farm as cattle-tenders—so, a subtle greeting to his closest relatives is hidden here, as well as an evidence of Smuul’s expertise in farming issues. Another one of these “weird” comparisons arises on the expedition’s way back. In the tropical latitudes of the Indian Ocean, Smuul sighs, “[t]he wishes of young, ripening rye coincide with mine: less blazing sun and more cooling water!” (AA 267). This is written on March 24, just about the time when the winter snow melts to expose green rye fields back on his home farm. Smuul demonstrates that he holds firmly onto his native wisdom in his interpretations of whatever environmental conditions he experiences, even when far away from Estonia.

Still, it does not mean that Smuul himself is always able to relate to the ocean enthusiastically. When approaching Australia through the “roaring forties,” Smuul characterizes the ocean as a “sleeping lion” and a “sleeping murderer.” As “Koooperatsia” passes the dangerous latitudes without encountering any strong storms, Smuul writes that the ship “gently slides over the surface of the sea like a butterfly hovers across the face of a sleeping killer” (AA 192). The same kind of fishermanly precaution is exercised here that was used in the beginning of the trip when the hares were mentioned running across the surface of the sea: it brings no good fortune to tell things straight.

The ocean may be deceptive, too. As the ship slowly drags on across warm, sleek Indian Ocean, Smuul feels as if the water engulfs all of his creative energy: “Sometimes I almost can see how a good sentence, a fine expression or an unfinished strophe slips away as a silver bleak (*Alburnus alburnus*) beneath its calm, sleek surface. I feel how the ocean sucks me dry and gives in return nothing but the perfect nightly silver circle and the bright daily mirror” (AA 251).

After weeks of still winds, the sleek ocean is characterized as “polished steel,” “sheet of lead,” “hot blanket”—as something physically heavy. The motionless ocean is one of the hardest things to bear. It requires a lot of patience and peace of mind, and thus the enduring process becomes a sort of spiritual exercise.

Smuul originated from a strictly Lutheran family, and he continued to stick to these theological roots even as a member of a Soviet scientific polar expedition. One of the most prominent manifestations of Lutheranism in his book is the way he begins the diary entry from January 14 with the famous words of Martin Luther in Worms: “Hier stehe ich, und ich kann nicht anders” (AA 141). It is quite typical for Smuul to drop an allusion to the Bible or to Protestant practices here and there in his writings.

Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out when comparing ice and desert that the estrangement experienced in polar areas is probably much stronger than that felt in deserts (154). This is because the latter have a strong cultural-historical context in peoples' mind, while polar areas lack a religious context or any context at all that would make it easier to relate to them. For Smuul, however, both sea and ice indeed have strong religious and cultural connotations similar to those attributed to the desert in Christian thought. He creates metaphors laden with Christian allusions, such as "sea cloister," "ice desert," "hot desert of water," and "blue hell" throughout *Antarctica Ahoy!* as well as in his other works.

After four weeks on the Atlantic Ocean, Smuul remarks, "[b]ut it [ocean] can also be so monotonous than even the most desolate of deserts seems a paradise of variety by comparison" (AA 63). The very next day he digs into the questions of religion for his play "Lea" and muses, among other religious issues, about paradise. In a humorous, yet apt, way, he likens Paradise to Antarctica: "The Christian paradise is somewhat reminiscent of Antarctica. There's the story that after a winter spent on the Ross Barrier Byrd had asked one of his companions what he had missed most sharply in the polar night. 'Temptation,' the latter had replied" (AA 66).

Smuul mentions the monotonous rhythm of the ocean that pushes one to follow a certain daily routine. It disciplines and subordinates, and there is no way of escaping the condition. For Smuul, who was much more productive in a ship's cabin than in the city, this was a good way to pursue his career as a writer. In the middle of a vast expanse of water, onboard a ship, one is constantly guarded by one's daily work (He even uses the figure of "Allah" for "work" in several passages!). Thence the metaphor of "sea cloister"—a place where one can concentrate on pursuing a single spiritual task, without the obligation of being engaged in earthly matters. Tuan reminds us that hermits used to withdraw to the desert for the same reasons, but in modern times the religious motives for seeking solitude in remote places of the Earth have been replaced by a misanthropic retreat and the seeking of challenges (145). Smuul represents an anachronism in that sense, as his motives for being interested in oceans and ice were definitely closer to religion than a retreat from humanity. This can be interpreted as a need for the exploration of one's inner landscapes, and makes it more plausible to place *Antarctica Ahoy!* in the exploratory tradition of arctic literature.

The lack of variety seems to be one of the key concerns for Smuul in comparing the huge water (ocean), solid water (continental glacier), and waterless (desert) areas. On his way back to Estonia, Smuul encounters real desert for the first time in his life, driving through Egypt. "The similarity with ocean is striking—as

well as its incomparability to it,” he states (AA 284). He also confesses his inability to make comparisons to anything in characterizing the continental glacier, the iceberg, or the silence of ocean. This refers to the supernatural essence of such experiences that is impossible to render for those who have not encountered anything similar themselves. It might take a mystic to explain such things—this is analogous to what Yi-Fu Tuan suggests in his article on deserts and ice when explicating the nature of the desert with the help of words from medieval mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart (144). Estonian literary critic Jaan Undusk has shown a number of elements of mysticism in Smuul’s “Poem to Stalin,” but the same theme in relation with Smuul’s depictions of polar areas must remain beyond the scope of the present study (137-64).

As “Kooperatsia” sails back through the Suez Canal, the sea and the desert merge in Smuul’s descriptions. He describes the dust from the desert lingering above seawater near the coast of Africa, creating the illusion that in the channel the ships are sailing through the desert. For Smuul, this evidently reinforced the idea of the symbolic proximity of ocean and desert. It is clear that ocean conveys the same kind of spiritual qualities for Smuul as the desert—it is a monotonous place for retreat from ordinary life and engaging in intellectual matters. A parallel can be drawn with polar ice as well, as its qualities of monotony and remoteness coincide with those of deserts and oceans.

Conclusion

Antarctica Ahoy!, with its narrative of a sea voyage and a stay in Antarctica, can be read as the author’s spiritual quest, his withdrawal from mundane concerns to solitude on the sea. Several difficulties wait to be tackled there, and Smuul is definitely aware of the hardships of such a quest as well as of its symbolic aspects. His journey can be likened to that of a hermit who goes out to the desert, prepared to overcome all temptations and hardships. This spiritual quest is marked by the traveler’s wishes to realize his childhood aspirations, to live up to the achievements of heroes in the history of the polar exploration, to test out and experience one’s personal mythology “in the field,” to engage in exercises of spiritual endurance, and to overcome one’s fears and hesitations. As such, Juhan Smuul’s “icy” travel book is a contribution to the international travel literature of the 20th century that deserves to be of continuing interest to 21st-century literary scholars.

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