

Opposite of South
by Sven Birkerts

I am, in all of my deepest identifications, a Northerner. Genetic background goes a long way toward laying the base. I am a first-generation Latvian American, and both sides of the family, as far back as we can trace, hail from places no more than a hundred kilometers on either side of the fifty-seventh parallel. All of the stories I grew up with, from the lives of my parents and their ancestors and from the books that my mother read to me, were somehow rooted in the geography and climate of that part of the world. Simple primary saturations: forest, winters, and the surges of the Baltic Sea, which has always figured in my imagination, rightly or wrongly, as cold and gray. And while my first vocabulary was Latvian, those sounds forever holding the deepest emotional associations, I have nevertheless always thrilled to the words *north* and *northern* whenever I have encountered them.

The word for north in Latvia is *ziema*, for “winter.” Northerners—*zeimelnieki*—were winter people, people from the place of a winter. But the Latvian word, compelling as it is, is narrower and less suggestive to me than its counterpart. *Ziemeli* invokes too directly the frigid core of the concept of north and insists on physical endurance almost exclusively, curtailing so many of the rich peripheral associations.

North. I am at a loss to account for the full biography of the one-syllable construct in my verbal consciousness. I can only marvel at the complexity of resonance I have funneled into the word. I mean not only the background sensations of family history and lore—subtract the elusive essence of north from these stories, and they change their nature entirely—but also an elaborate, subtle ethics of stoicism, which if I pursued it diligently enough, would probably turn out to be a metaphysics complete with founding principles.

North. Simply and obviously, it is the opposite of south, a definition I sometimes call upon as a personal shorthand device to help me get closer to the feeling, the psychology, or what I want to explain. In therapy—itself at some level a betrayal of the Northern ethos, as I understand it—I often rely upon a caricature of my opposite number, the man I so often long to be: the vivid, flash-tempered Sicilian who moves through life by way of emotional explosions, discharging strong feelings before they settle, turn into sediment, or crystallize and grow hard and hurtful edges. What I am really talking about, of course, is my own character, my genetically transmitted, culturally reinforced way of taking in and giving out emotion, my essential rigidity, my held-in nature—my Northernness.

If I am right in making this large-scale geographical, or latitudinal, observation—if I am not simply projecting upon and extrapolating from the merely personal—then I might argue that the essential Northern character, with its deep Lutheran reticences, its iron-flanged stoicism, holds itself counter to the whole paradigm of our progressive, melioristic, therapeutically-oriented millennial culture. Insofar as my images of North encode a message, an assumption about life, it is that circumstance is fundamentally adversarial; human relations are difficult; resolution (never mind transcendence) is unlikely; and the best one can do is to keep one’s own counsel, hold fast while enduring disappointments and defeats, and accept that the highest human goal is to greet fate with dignified composure.

Where did I pick this up? Since earliest times, the observing and listening to my people, hearing their stories, taking in the inflections of admiration that quickly became part of my instruction book for living. “And he never said another word to her, never told he how he felt. Can you imagine what strength that took?” Always a moral, always an implied code of behavior. Whatever the account, whatever twist it took, I never failed to get the sense of a self enduring, holding firm, and—most compelling of all—masking its pain.

Do I still subscribe to this worldview? No, not consciously, anyway. Indeed, in many ways I live my life against it—I hope for clarified relationships, trust in the possibilities of growth and improvement

(in the self, in the world), long for transcendence in any number of ways. But I also know that my bedrock intuitions, the ones I sometimes try to counter so strenuously, are a product of my Northernness. I feel them whenever I cannot get past myself in a difficult emotional situation, when the inner obstacles don't yield. But I also know that they have come to my rescue, have helped me bear down on a hard task, hold off gratification, and mobilize resistance when I've needed it most.

For a hundred good reasons, to which I mainly subscribe, our culture has demonized repression. Repression is unhealthy; it is the sclerosis of the emotional life, one of the main sources of human unhappiness. Why is it, then that I respond so much more intensely to art that is premised upon restraint? Clear lines. Characters who understate their pain and hold their secrets, who tighten themselves against the harshness of the world. On the personal place, why am I, psychologically educated as I claim to be, still stirred by the taciturn, the inhibited, those who seem to accept that it is their lot to be solitary in the world?

I think of the face of the actor Max von Sydow, so familiar in its cast. I see traces of my father's face there. The ascetic nose, the bitter grimace. Hints, too, of Joseph Brodsky's face, which I never tired of watching years ago when he was my teacher, the line of his mouth at once a wince and its containment, the forward set of the lower jaw, so I imagined, a determined damming of some strong feeling. Stoicism, austerity, and—yes—privacy. All of these faces, I realize as I picture them, propose their own self-containment. They are not turned toward the world with some expectations or desire of completion. They do not await the answering other, and for this reason, they remain mysterious. Private faces in public places, wrote W. H. Auden, another Northerner, are better than public faces in private places.

What I am moving toward saying—I see it now—is this: that these various attributes are all, for me, tokens of inwardness. In my mythology, harshness and remoteness sit guard over a susceptibility heightened by solitude. This is the compass needle's true north, I'm convinced: the self in isolation—silent, all emotion, thought, and perception contained, held, amplified within their enclosure, even as the strain of the containment signals to others what they cannot possess.

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