

The _Blank_Space

Glenn Gould, Russia, Finland And The North

[Sergei Medvedev](#)

The Unbearable Lightness Of The North

Of all corners of the world, North is the furthest. It is the most elusive and the least circumscribed, an ill-defined space rather than a delineated place. An old Russian joke has it, that there are no roads in Russia, only directions. Likewise the North is a direction to which the compass needle points but never arrives; the North lacks locality, territoriality, borders and other signs of our rational geometrical civilization.

Lacking in rationality, the North is rich in mythos and implied meanings. In many traditional mythologies the North is singled out as the *outer* fringe; it is much more external to the center than the South, East or West.¹ This is specifically important for the Scandinavian mythology, where the central populated *Midgard* is opposed to barren, rocky and cold *Utgard* inhabited by giants (Jotuns); the *Utgard*, however, does not completely encircle the *Midgard*, but rather lies in the North. The same is characteristic of most Siberian mythologies, and of the Finns, who locate the realm of the dead, *Manala*, in the North. Its more general name is *Pohjola* ("Northern Land"), a frozen rocky expanse where earth meets the sky. In this sense, the North is not simply one of the peripheries, but the generic outback, mother of all peripheries.

This is not to deny a mythological dimension to other parts of the world. The West has its rich mythology of being the sinister "left side", the side of the sunset and the dead, but also the side of wealth and gold, from Eldorado and mythical India to the American frontier. The East engenders myths of sunrise, life and birth, the Christmas star and the Three Kings; *Morgenland* is the land of wisdom and meditation, while later connotations include various forms of European curiosity, from Orientalism to *chinoiserie*. Finally, the South has the most basic mythology of sunshine and a plentiful land, symbolized by Goethe's "*Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen bluhn?*", and *Bounty* chocolate advertisements.

However, both West and East have been explored and assimilated by the modern culture, and rendered even less sacral by the end of the Cold War, while the South has been relegated to the overpopulated Third World. Which leaves us with the North as the last Frontier, the only part of the world that holds the fascination of emptiness, a white space in our mental maps. Few people travel to Cape Finisterre in Portugal, the western-most point of Europe, for its symbolic value; Europe's southernmost and

eastern-most points are hardly known to the public at all; on the contrary, an entire tourist industry has been built around pilgrimages to the Nordkap. The North turns out to be marketable precisely because of its remoteness, a relative obscurity and anonymity.

In other words, whereas the East, West and South have more or less fixed meanings, and are interpreted as relatively populated and explored, the North appears as a mythological domain, a semiotic project, a constructed identity. The North is more often communicated than experienced, imagined rather than embodied. Talking of the signifier and the signified, Ferdinand de Saussure used the metaphor of the sheet of paper: the *signifié* and the *signifiant* are inextricably linked as two sides of the same sheet. In the North, this structuralist link is far less obvious; indeed, the North may be a one-sided sheet of paper, a signifier without the signified. The North is the emptiness we are filling with our imagination, narratives and texts; a blank sheet of paper, on which words are written and erased; an empty snow field on which lonely figures emerge, pass, and disappear.

The following four fragments examine northernness as a construction of identity around a blank space, the field of emptiness. The first has to do with the "Idea of North" as devised by the Canadian pianist, writer and communicator Glenn Gould, manifested in his texts, radio broadcasts and innovative interpretations of J.S. Bach's piano works. The second fragment deals with an alternative construction of national identity in Northern Russia in the late Middle Ages – a project never accomplished in reality, yet fully consummated in spirit. The third fragment, on the contrary, treats a palpable reality – the state called Finland – constructed around the idea of a Northern borderland and periphery. The final fragment speaks about a virtual construction of regionality in Europe's North in the 1990s, including regional initiatives such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Region and Finland's recent Northern Dimension initiative for the EU. These four fragments have nothing in common except the fact that the North, taken as the idea of emptiness, solitude, minimalism and resignation, nurtures creative imagination in such dissimilar enterprises. Or probably it is the deceiving lightness of the snow, and the elusive quality of light of the high latitudes, that allows for a free play of notes, words and identities.

Bach In The Snow: Glenn Gould's *the Idea Of North*

The Canadian Glenn Gould (1932-1982) has undertaken probably the most radical reinterpretation of Johann Sebastian Bach's piano music in the 20th century. In fact, this was rather a rediscovery of Bach, a return to Bach's original *Urtext*, pure and sublime. Despite its enormous human appeal, Bach's music tends to be abstract, as exemplified by a massive edifice like the *Art of the Fugue*, a body of purely

intellectual music, a lofty exercise in counterpoint. The *Art of the Fugue* was not even intended for any specific instrument, or ensemble, or indeed for performance. Rather than music to hear and feel, this is a text to read and decipher, an enjoyment for the eyes and the brain, rather than for the ears and the heart.

Likewise, much of Bach's piano music is a contrived orderly exercise in tonality, in counterpoint, in playing technique, etc. But, ever since Bach's rediscovery for a wider audience by the early Romantics (first of all by Felix Mendelssohn) in the 1840s, and for the next century, his music was interpreted in an increasingly sensual manner, with varied tempi, dynamic contrasts, and colorful timbres. Aided by the construction of the modern piano, which took its shape by the middle of the 19th century, generations of musicians and listeners alike have read into Bach's piano work a lot of extra-textual meaning and feeling. This Romantic and post-Romantic reading of Bach was summarized in Bruno Muggelini's "*Critical Edition*" of Bach's piano music, a textbook for generations of keyboard enthusiasts, complete with dynamic and tempo indications, accents, ligatures, etc.

In his 1950s concerts, and especially in the 1955 recording of the *Goldberg Variations* which instantaneously made him famous, Glenn Gould resolutely challenged this tradition by returning to Bach's *Urtext*, strict and rigorous. His obsessive search of a tight-actioned piano, and treatment of his instrument much like the harpsichord or even its precursor, the virginal, a refusal to use the pedal, a *non-legato* and *non-rubato* manner of play, a radical revision of tempi have stressed Bach's counterpoint and brought out the lines and voices hitherto obscured by the "harmonious" and "heroic" Romantic interpretation of Bach. The result was the clarity of definition and textures and a rarely equaled analytical subtlety and acuity,² with notes detached like strokes in a pointillist painting of Georges Seurat, and voices clear like monochrome lines in the works of Piet Mondrian. For Gould, rhythm and the clarity of articulation prevailed over melody and harmony; in challenging the *legato* nature of the piano, he found the ideal of the keyboard in the 16th-century English virginal music (William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons).

What Gould did to Bach was the deconstruction of a dominant Romantic discourse. Deleuze and Guattari defined deconstruction as bracketing out all non-discourse preconditions of language;³ by the same token, Gould's return to Bach's *Urtext* was a return to music as pure discourse, excluding all non-discursive elements and meanings, destroying the binary oppositions of *forte* and *piano*, *legato* and *staccato*, etc. This act of deconstruction to some extent places Glenn Gould in the context of postmodernism, although his eccentric personality evades strict definitions and classifications.

Glenn Gould's personal lifestyle was both eccentric and hermetic. The pianist refused to fly, took car trips by himself to the far north of Canada, and spent the last years of his life sequestered in a claustrophobic hotel studio on the outskirts of Toronto. His image included a bizarre getup consisting of woolen gloves, sweater, coat and scarf, even in warm weather. In 1964 he retired, at the wizened age of thirty-two, from all public concert recitals to devote himself entirely to recording.⁴

Gould's obsession with recording, and his incessant search of total control of the medium was matched by his interest in new recording technologies, and electronic media, going far beyond the technocratic fashion of the 1960s. He is known to have taken interest in the ideas of his compatriot Marshall McLuhan. Apart from being a great musician, Gould was also a master of manipulation, or "creative lying", as he put it himself,⁵ constructing his transparent spaces of air and fantasy, bringing his listener an intellectual reward, rather than sensual gratification. Gould himself was the message no less powerful than the music he sought to convey, or to re-compose.

Much of Gould's method has to do with the artist's fascination with the Idea of North. Having spent much of his childhood amid Northern landscape in his family's country house on Lake Simcoe (on the edge of Northern Ontario), Gould was always inspired by Northern Canada, and planned spending several months of the polar night behind the Arctic Circle. He liked citing his mother's family relationship to the Norwegian composer Edward Grieg. Gould's interpretation of Grieg's Piano Sonata Op. 1, its peaceful, detached, unworldly sonority reveals yet another vision of northernness. And, of course, what Gould could only emulate in his music – the idea of northernness

he was always able to materialize in his clothing: his eccentric sweater, scarf and mittens as ascetic signs of a deeper Northern faith.

The interest of the artist in the psychological aspects of the far north as well as in life in remote locations in Northern Canada translated itself into an innovative series of radio documentaries entitled *The Idea of North* that Gould produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Company. He sought to examine the personal experiences of solitude during the Arctic winter, the stories of silence, resignation and human endurance. In these documentaries Gould experimented with human voices, making them sound in counterpoint like voices in a fugue, completely discernible, individual and solitary, combining in the meta-narrative of the North, transparent and pristine.

Gould re-invented Bach in a Northern manner, by means of minimalist reduction. He avoided the temptations of the experimental and avant-garde minimalism of John Cage, and the crowd-pleasing New Age minimalism of Philip Glass; Gould's "Northern" minimalism was a rigorous reduction to notes, an ascetic resignation. Gould's sound reminds one of a Northern landscape, subdued, uncolored and

understated.⁶ The Canadian artist has transcended the sensual nature of the modern piano (therefore his habit of "singing", i.e. accompanying his piano playing with his voice which he explained as an attempt to overcome the mechanical imperfection of the piano, lowering the barrier between the music he heard in his imagination, and its actual sound in reality) and reached for the pure musical text. His music-making was a construction of immaculate uncorrupted textuality, and North was his natural medium.⁷ The North is textual per se; it is, in a sense, an *Urtext*, a white field, a blank space, a one-sided sheet of paper, a non-referential sign, a quintessential periphery questioning the dominant narratives of modernity. The North is an abode of schizophrenic solitude and unimpeded creativity. It is all about imagination and invention, a mischievous and playful blizzard, a creative lie.

Another Russia: North As Russia's Spiritual Refuge

The Russian seal, the double-headed eagle, symbolizes the national project of bridging East and West. The binary format of national identity includes both the imperial component (the seal was taken from the fallen Byzantine Empire in the mid-16th century), and the inherent cultural duality of Russia. The main narrative of Russia has been shaped by this dichotomy, complete with the two traditional battlefronts of Russia (the Steppes in the East and Catholicism in the West), the two directions of imperial expansion (Central Asia and the Caucasus are "East" rather than "South"), the two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the two main intellectual parties, the Slavophiles and the Westernizers (the Eurasianists have never risen to political prominence).

However, the Russian project is not exhausted by this binary opposition, with alternative forms of national identity periodically emerging in the North. Northern Russian "sideshows" have never aspired for the national scene, or indeed for political power, but remained ideal (at times idealistic) and imaginative experiments, peculiar indications of what Russia could have been, but never was.

One such development was taking place in the Russian Church in the mid-14th century, at the end of a protracted "Asian episode" of Russian history, the Tartar yoke. A decisive fight with the Golden Horde, the 1380 Battle of Kulikovo Polye, was still to come, and Russia was in a deep economic, cultural and moral crisis. Meanwhile, the first attempts at rebuilding were already underway. The Russian Orthodoxy, that for over a century had been displaying the heroic holiness of warrior saints, now produced a new industrious devotion, oriented towards politics and economics. However, by the 14th century, the Russian Orthodoxy produced a completely different type of holiness the ascetic ideal represented by several generations of the "Trans-Volgastartsy", the desert monks of Northern Russia.

The ascetic movement emerged in the mid-14th century in several places in Northern Russia. It was headed by one of the most revered Russian saints, St. Sergius of Radonezh. A son of wealthy parents, after their death he gave away his property and at the age of twenty-one retired from the world. He set out to live in the wild forest northeast of Moscow. His brother, who accompanied him at the beginning, could not bear the hardships of desert life and abandoned him. For a long period St. Sergius lived completely alone, surrounded by wild animals; the legend has it, that his only companion was a bear. Later on, disciples and pilgrims started to come, and eventually the secluded shelter turned into a monastery, the renowned Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Laura.

The ascetic movement continued with St. Sergius' followers who went further North, venturing hundreds of miles into the wilderness. St. Kirill of the Beloye lake, St. Paul of Obnorsk, St. Dionisius of Glushitsa, St. Cornelius of Komel settled in the truly wild places of the North: White (Beloe) Lake, the Vologda forests, and even as far as the coast of the White Sea.⁸ Continuing throughout the 15th century, this spiritual movement later was described as the Golden Age of Russian asceticism.

There were two main elements to this movement. The first was geography, the northern vector of the ascetic calling. It was namely in the North that the Russian religious renaissance took place in the 14th-15th centuries. The other element was the strong spiritual thrust of the movement. This was initiated by St. Sergius himself (the first and only saint in Russia, a country with a weak tradition of theology and religious mysticism), who devoted his life to the Holy Trinity and who claimed to see the apparition of the Holy Virgin.⁹ The Trans-Volga *startsya*, too, concentrated on the spiritual side of faith, caring little about wealth, education, economic activity, and other lay aspects of Christianity.

The impractical nature of the Northern religious renaissance might seem strange at a time when the country was recovering from Tartar rule, and gathering its forces. For example, an alternative religious vision – a practical, worldly, policy-oriented Christianity – was later developed in Moscow by St. Joseph of Volotsk, and soon became closely connected, at first, with the Moscow Princes and then with the Moscow Tsars in a traditional Russo-Byzantine "symphony" of the Church and the State. However, the North was the site for the creation of a spiritual alternative to the imperial Muscovite Russia, constructing Russia as *civitas Dei*, a City of God, and not as a *civitas mundi*.

Indeed, northernness turns out to be Russia's most distinctive otherness. The North has historically emerged as a spiritual refuge from the proprietary policies of Moscow and also of St. Petersburg, the imperial capital of Russia. It was in the North that

hundreds of thousands of the Old Believers, *raskolniki*, fled after the 1654 schism of the Russian church, persecuted by the Moscow Tsars and later by Peter the Great. Their flight was not simply an escape, but a religious Odyssey, a search for the promised land of the true faith. In their drive, *raskolniki* reached the northernmost and eastern-most fringes of Russia, crossed the Bering Strait into Alaska, spreading into the Northwest of the American continent where their colonies could be found as far away as San Francisco.

Some better-known examples of "alternative Russia" in the North include the medieval republics of Novgorod (1136-1478) and Pskov (1348-1510), reaching to the White Sea and North Urals, or the Pomor trade of Northern Russia with the Hanseatic League in the 14th and 15th centuries. As to Russia's northern capital, St. Petersburg, it has a certain duality with respect to mainstream Russia discourse. On the one hand, it is the capital of the Russian empire, the seat of bureaucracy, a step-mother of the nation, a contrived but heartless city of granite, castigated by generations of Russian poets and writers. On the other hand, it is a powerful alternative to Moscow, an alternative of an imaginary kind. The same poets called St. Petersburg a phantom, a miasma of the Neva swamps, an imagined city where monuments can at any moment come to life. In the Russian cultural tradition, from Alexander Pushkin to Andrei Belyi and the "World of Art" movement, St. Petersburg was a city of specters, never certain of its own existence. In a way, this was a reflection of the fact that it was "the most contrived city in the world", as Fyodor Dostoyevski called it, an autocratic caprice, a product of whimsical imagination of Peter the Great. Moscow was a rooted, natural city, the heart of Russia. St. Petersburg was Russia's head or rather, Russia's dream.

During the Soviet period, as the capital moved back to Moscow, the Northern alternative in St. Petersburg was (culturally) stressed even further. It became a capital of intellectual dissidence (being detached from the seat of power, the Leningrad intelligentsia was to a lesser extent integrated into the ruling regime than their Moscow brethren), and has continuously incurred the wrath of the Soviet authorities, from the "Leningrad trial" and the assassination of Sergei Kirov in the 1930s to the intellectual purges of Andrei Zhdanov in the 1940s. It is also noteworthy that in the late Soviet period, under Mikhail Gorbachev, Leningrad produced a large part of the political elite of the first "democratic wave" (Anatoli Sobchak, Galina Starovoitova, Anatoli Chubais).

At a crucial point in the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union was about to collapse, the Northern alternative once again emerged in Russia, this time in the writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The dissident writer called on Russia to concentrate her forces, to abandon the neo-imperial designs and attempts to preserve the Union, and to embark upon a period of enlightened isolation, developing in the Northeastern

direction. Solzhenitsyn cited the 15th-century monks' drive to the North as a prophesy of the future destiny of Russia.¹⁰ This appeal gained some public attention, but when Solzhenitsyn returned from the exile and became a fact of the political and intellectual routine, his Northern project fell into oblivion.

The Russian North was represented in different periods by the ascetics and schismatics, by the free hunters and citizens of the medieval city-states, by dreamers like the St. Petersburg writer Vladimir Odoevsky and avant-garde Leningrad poet Daniil Kharms, and appeared as a religious, cultural and political alternative to the dominant Russian discourse embedded in the semi-Asian Moscow. Being essentially decentered and peripheral, a Frontier close to the elements, the North engenders a freedom of spirit and intellectual daring. It questions mainland Russia but never itself provides an answer or produces an institutional alternative.

The North was never more than a promise of a different Russia, an unrealized cultural form, a Celestial Jerusalem sought by the schismatics and found in spirit. The Russian North is an imagined identity, an illusory belonging, a myth, like Atlantis, or the Golden Age. In the end, it does not really matter whether or not Atlantis, the Golden Age or the legendary Russian North existed in the past; what really matters is that their mythology shapes our narratives of the present.

Finland: A Northern Road To Postmodernity

To see the link between Finland's northernness and the condition of postmodernity, one need not go further than the films of the Kaurismäki brothers, like *Night on Earth*. Their ironic quality sublimates and celebrates marginal people, situations and discourses, indeed Finland's peripherality as such.

By virtue of history and geography, Finland has been marginalized thrice: as a Northern hinterland of Europe, as a Swedish, and later Russian, province, and as an East-West border. Finland has been permanently finding herself in No Man's Land, a mythical Ultima Thule, in a liminal position, like Karl Jaspers' "ultimate situation" or Gilles Deleuze's "schizophrenia". Finland is a generic periphery, a northern borderland which has become a state.

Finland's national project has been traditionally influenced by feelings of borderdom and backwardness, and a desire to abandon these for the sake of an image of shining modernity. However, overwhelming proprietary neighbors and ruthless Great Power politics have always marginalized Finland. This is the central problematic and the essential psychological trauma of Finnish modernity which has never been consummated. The impossibility of completing the internally conflicted

project of modernity has led Finland to a critical reappraisal of her Northern peripheral status, especially after being firmly locked in a post-World War II international configuration within the Soviet sphere of influence. Making the best of her ambiguous international standing, Finland has made of 'peripherality' a virtue called neutrality, and a political novelty called Finlandization.

Northernness, remoteness, anonymity, neutrality, and to some extent even "Sovietness", have combined into an unpretentious yet comfortable setting. In this environment, Finland was not compelled to care about a number of traditional tasks of modernity such as forming a grand national narrative, building a defense industry or developing its own security doctrine. On the other hand, a northern location, the sheer size of undeveloped territories, and peripheral communities in need of state support have placed special demands on the development of communications infrastructure and welfare schemes.

By design, Finland is largely a modern country, respectful of police and the President. However, Finland's Nordicity, peripherality and cultural duality are permanently placing her into various postmodern contexts. A typical Finnish landscape is that of a deserted forest crowned by a cellphone transmitter tower. Premodern conifers and postmodern technology combine in a unique environmentally-friendly politically-correct cyberscape. Except for a few mountainous areas in Northern Lapland, Finland is flat (which is also reflected in its architecture and communal housing); it looks like one big rhizome, one of Deleuze's and Guattari's "thousand plateaus". Finland's borderdom has led her to postmodern affluent boredom ahead of the West. She has arrived ahead of schedule, she is already there, sitting by a lakeside sauna, speaking decent English into a Nokia mobile phone. The only nuisances are the mosquitoes.

In general, borderlands and peripheries are breeding grounds for postmodernity. Outlying countries such as Finland, Ireland and Portugal are more comfortable with the postmodern polity of the EU than the core heavyweights. The additional merit of Finland's peripherality is her border with Russia, endowing her with greater political leverage, EU's structural/regional funds, and possibilities for engaging in cooperative non-exclusive networks.

Finland has capitalized on her northernness and backwoodness, first as a nation-state, and later as a transnational actor. She is remarkably relevant in a post-national world, politically, economically and socially. Also, in terms of global etiquette, Finland's northernness rhymes with political correctness: the country is green, environmental, non-NATO, UN-loving, liberal, tolerant, dolphin-friendly, free-range, low-cholesterol, low-maintenance, and on top of all that, run by a female president. A green dream and a Northern construct.

Finland, being perfectly aware of her peripheral position, never seriously tried to change it, either by constructing her own centrality or by joining some other existing center. Instead, Finland has come to prominence in a new (electronic) world in which traditional center-periphery relationships are relativized and inversed. Today, it is not so much that Finland has become a center as that the whole world has become a periphery. Centers become increasingly pointless and numerous peripheries proliferate, dictating new norms of urban planning, economic life and group identities (e.g. Orange County in California). The North, a periphery *par excellence*, has therefore turned out to be perfectly suited to our unexciting tomorrows.

Inventing Northern Europe

For both Russia and Finland, the North has provided an escape from the dominant East-West binary; an alternative fully implemented by Finland, and never realistically entertained by Russia. For Europe writ large, the North may be an alternative as well. In the North, Europe has a unique opportunity to look at herself from a different perspective, escaping from the doom of East-West frictions that stream her modern history.

Once again, the North emerges as a postmodern alternative, relativizing and deconstructing binary opposites. A postmodern solution for the East-West dilemma can thus be found by defining the figure of the Third (pole), namely the European North. The North (including the Baltic and Barents regions) is unique in several ways. First, what distinguishes it from other areas along the "Great Cultural Divide" (Rudolf Kjellen) is its shared peripherality with respect to both East and West. Narratives of "great Europe" and "great Russia" are marginalized and estranged in the Nordic fringes, and their opposition is made relative. In this sense, the prospects of region-building in the North are relatively unaffected by the East-West controversy.

Second, the North is less influenced by "vertical" discourses and structures of subordination. It has never been too strongly subjected to the disciplining projects of Catholicism, Russian imperialism,¹¹ Soviet Communism, Atlanticism or Europeanism, while its Lutheran legacy has never given rise to a dominating type of supranationalism. Thus, over the centuries, the North has developed a sort of cultural and political permissiveness, an allergy to grand narratives and various forms of collectivism, and a healthy pragmatism based on Lutheran individualism and Hanse-type liberalism.

Finally, a major asset of the North is the existence of an East-West interface, the Finnish Russian (which is also the EU-Russian) border, which maintains an intricate

network of cross-border "horizontal" dependencies, and a considerable political potential for regionalism.

A shared periphery, a cooperative psychological setup, and an experience of local networking exempt the North from the traditional territorial discourses based on power, history and identity, placing it in a deterritorialized post-national paradigm in which spaces are increasingly imagined and communicated. The North emerges as one of the so-called "meso-regions", i.e. less determined by geography than by ideas, symbols, visions or strategic instruments, all aimed at mobilizing resources to solve common problems. According to Riccardo Capellin, meso-regions "do not correspond to existing territories but may indicate future territories and correspond to actual tendencies of development within them"¹².

For some years now, the North has been constructed as a sort of "future territory", an imagined belonging, an experiment in postmodern territoriality whereby a region is being politically produced, communicated as politically relevant. Academics and politicians compete in constructing and floating visions of a European North that anticipate and even generate reality. For instance, Norwegian policy planners claim to have "invented" the Barents Euro-Arctic Region. According to Sverre Jervell, "it is possible to draw a circle on a map, define this circle as a new region, and await the events. In Norway's case, we invented a region, and to our surprise, it became a reality".¹³ Titles of recent academic papers on regionalism in the European North display the same imaginative quality: "Constructing a Sea without Water" (Leo Granberg), "Dreaming of the Barents Region" (Jyrki Kakonen), "Invention of the Barents Region" (Ola Tunander), etc.¹⁴As stated by Pertti Joenniemi,

the forms of new regionality in general tend to be light, innovative, spontaneous, in no way self-evident and perhaps at times even opportunistic. The reading might be that these are assets rather than liabilities. Region-building attracts interest because regions have a strong conceptual and visionary side; they are incomplete and still in the making. The conceptual breakthrough making them into joint platforms of communication is already important as such.¹⁵

The Nordic academic and political community engages in the subjectivity of a Schopenhauerian intensity, producing the Region as Will and Idea. A radical postmodernist like Jean Baudrillard has described this phenomenon as a "precession of the model".

A similar semiotic exercise has been undertaken in the Finnish initiative for the EU called the Northern Dimension. Its most remarkable feature has been that it has remained a purely discursive enterprise, an exercise not in planning, but "naming". As Pertti Joenniemi states: "[T]he initiative has encountered some success as a discourse,

but remains vague in political or institutional terms". Most strikingly, it has not been endowed with any specific institutions or specially targeted resources; the 1998 ruling by the EU Commission even denied it the status of a "regional initiative". In the same paper, Joenniemi gives an account of the Northern Dimension's impact:

The Finnish initiative of a Northern Dimension, launched originally in 1997, yielded results in the sense that the European Council *noted* in December 1998, in response to an Interim Report prepared by the Commission, that the region has needs that the EU will have to address. It was *noted* that the Northern region is of special importance to the Union. The region *is seen* as being rich in natural resources and human potential. Moreover, it *invites* cooperation with Russia. The Council *called* for a coherent approach and effective policies towards the region in all EU issues. The bolstered position of northernness was given symbolical expression by *enriching the vocabularies* of the Union with the concept of a 'Northern Dimension'.

The italicized words pertain to the sphere of pure discourse, and, consequently, the Northern Dimension boils down to a mere symbolic exchange whose greatest achievement to date is "enriching the vocabulary". It renders the ND invaluable in diplomatic terms – it is PR-intensive, media-effective, low-cost and non-committal at the same time.

It remains to be seen whether the ND enterprise, or indeed the entire region-building process in Europe's North, within or outside the EU, will yield any practical results. In a sense, it does not matter much, as long as the North remains a discursive and intellectual testing-ground. Maybe the ultimate purpose of the "Northern Dimension" in European history will lie in preserving Europe's transcendental intelligible nature, remaining blank, like a palimpsest, on which texts are written, just to be erased and replaced by other texts, or like Karl Popper's "Third Universe", the textual world of objective knowledge which is disconnected from everyday prosaic pursuits.

Whatever it stands for, the North continues to display a remarkable intensity of verbal life, inviting new imaginations and discourses. If like nature, the EU abhors a vacuum, then the final destiny of the Northern Dimension may lie in our filling the blank space of the North with ephemeral passing texts. This essay can be considered as a contribution to this neverending discursive exercise, a merry-go-round of signs and simulations, clowns and horses, all revolving ceaselessly in the empty wintry park.

Notes

- [1.](#) The viewpoint taken in this text is European, in fact Eurocentric. Obviously North and South would mean something completely different for, for example, an Argentinean (cf. Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The South*).
- [2.](#) Jonathan Cott, *Conversations with Glenn Gould*. Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., p. 11.
- [3.](#) Deleuze, Gilles et Felix Guattari. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'Anti-OEdipe*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980: p. 98.
- [4.](#) Cott, p. 12.
- [5.](#) Andrew Kazdin. *Glenn Gould at Work: Creative Lying*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989, pp. 121-122
- [6.](#) The Northern, "chilling" character of intellectual counterpoint music has been examined in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Arnold Schoenberg's highly rationalized twelve-tone system is associated there with images of cold and ice crystals, and private hell of the novel's protagonist, composer Adrian Leverkühn, is made of ice.
- [7.](#) The link between Gould's Bach and the North has been perfectly captured by the Canadian film director Francois Girard in his *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (the structure of the film repeats the 32 Goldberg Variations). The leitmotif of the film is the image of an empty snow field. In the first episode, set to the opening Aria from the Goldberg Variations, a lonely figure of Glenn Gould appears in the snow, and slowly approaches the viewer. In the final episode, set to the concluding Aria, Gould walks away and disappears in the whiteness.
- [8.](#) Georgy Fedotov, "Tragedia drevnerusskoi svyatosti" [The Tragedy of Old Russian Holiness], in *Fedotov, Imperia i svoboda* [Empire and Freedom], New York: Posev, 1989, p. 103.
- [9.](#) Georgy Fedotov, *Svyatye drevnei Rusi* [The Saints of the Old Russia]. Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989, pp.128-132, 138.
- [10.](#) Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Kak nam obustroit Rossiyu* [How We Can Settle In Russia]. Moscow: Komsomolskaya Pravda, 1990. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Raskayanie i samoogranichenie kak kategorii natsionalnoi zhizni" [Repentance and self-restriction as categories of national life], *Novyi mir*, no. 5, 1991, pp. 15-16.
- [11.](#) Cf. Russia's ruthless treatment of Poland and a generally milder attitude to Finland during the 19th century.
- [12.](#) Riccardo Cappellin, "Interregional Cooperation in Europe: An Introduction", in Cappellin & P.W.J. Batey (eds) *Regional Networks, Border Regions and European Integration*. London: Pion, 1993, p. 2.

[13.](#) Sverre Jervell, "Barentssamarbeidet februar 1996. Hvor star vi, hvor gar vi nu?" [Barents Cooperation February 1996. Where Do We Stand and Where Are We Heading?] Presentation at Pax Nordica, Umea, February 1996.

[14.](#) Leo Granberg, "How to Construct a Sea Without Water: Construction and Institutionalization of the Barents Euro-Arctic Region", Paper presented at "Border Regions in Transition", 14-18 June 1997, Sortavala and Joensuu; Jyrki Kakonen, ed. *Dreaming of the Barents Region. Interpreting Cooperation in the Euro-Arctic Rim*. TAPRI Research Report no. 73, 1996; Ola Tunander "Invention of the Barents Region: Overcoming the East-West Divide in the North", in Olav Stokke and Ola Tunander (eds) *The Barents Region. Cooperation in Arctic Europe*. London: SAGE, 1994, pp. 31-45.

[15.](#) Pertti Joenniemi, "The Barents Euro-Arctic Region: On the Restructuring of Northernmost Europe", Paper prepared for the project "Multi-Layered Integration: The Sub-Regional Dimension", Institute for EastWest Studies, New York, February 1997, p. 26.

Sergei Medvedev is a Russian researcher and professor currently working in Helsinki. His writings focus on the Russian state, post-Communism and postmodernity, cultural anthropology and political geography.