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Between the Map and the Terrain

Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2022-2066>

Abstract: This article explores heteropian, utopian and dystopian places in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's 2017 novel, *Vestlandet*, in order to better understand how the author uses references to regional historical and contemporary figures and events to construct what Edward Said labeled a cultural archive in a larger anti-imperialist project. Language, landscape, and identity form the core of Nødtvedt's project. This raucously humorous novel activates the Foucauldian heteropias of indefinitely accumulating time and of the festival, as well as Marc Augé's notion of the non-place in order to comment upon the perceived cultural and political divide between western and eastern Norway.

Keywords: heterotopia, anti-imperialism, Nødtvedt, *Vestlandet*, cultural archive, regional identity

Per Thomas Andersen uses the terms “sen-topografisk” and “ny-kartografering” to designate a trend in recent Norwegian literature that seeks to explore the significance and particularity of the regional and local within the context of transnational modernity and resists the deterritorialization that otherwise is thought to characterize much of contemporary literature. Andersen applies these terms in particular to the work of Øyvind Rimbereid, who released a collection of poetry entitled *Seine topografier* in 2000 (2012, 690). Dag Solstad's novel, *Det uoppløselige episke element i Telemark i perioden 1591–1896* (2013) might also be said to exemplify this revitalization of one of Norway's oldest forms of (early) modern literary expression, namely topographical literature, in this case intensely focused through a single genealogical line across three hundred years of history.¹ As different as it is from the work of Rimbereid and Solstad, one of the more notable

¹ Nødtvedt, who has called Solstad's novel “eit namnesymfoni” has a somewhat similar project in his 2019 poetry collection *Slekter* (cited in Landro 2013, 12).

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examples of a sustained engagement with the topographical writing of the past can be found in Erlend O. Nødtvedt's novel, *Vestlandet* (2017).

Since his literary debut in 2008, Nødtvedt has demonstrated an interest in the so-called Bergen humanists of the sixteenth century and a particular fascination for their central figure, Absalon Pederssøn Beyer (1528–75). Beyer, like his older and younger colleagues Mattis Størssøn and Peder Claussøn Friis, wrote extensively on the landscape, people, and historical conditions that distinguished Norway in a time when it had all but lost its status as a distinct political or cultural entity, in particular after the implementation of absolutism by the Danish crown starting in 1536. Beyer's most important work, *Om Norgis Rige* (1567), describes among other things Norway's struggle for existence in a period dominated by the economic power of the Hanseatic league. In his introduction to the 1928 edition of *Om Norgis Rige*, Harald Beyer points out that the author abandoned his claim to historical objectivity and expressed patriotic hope for the future of Norway in the following passage: "Dog kunde vel Norge vogne op af søvne en gang, der som hun finge en regenter over sig, thi hun er icke aldeles saa forfalden oc forsmectit, at hun jo kunde komme til sin mact oc herlighed igjen" (Beyer 1928, 73). There is a clear parallel between Beyer's dream of a Norway that would regain the status it once held in a glorified past and Nødtvedt's vision of a Vestlandet that will rise again. Both posit an overt external enemy, with Nødtvedt's satirical portrayal of the cultural and political elite from eastern Norway corresponding to Beyer's critical view of the Hanseatic league. Unlike Beyer, however, Nødtvedt shares with the later topographical writer Petter Dass, the author of *Nordlands Trompet* (first published posthumously in 1739), a preoccupation with and love for the particulars of an overtly regional (as opposed to national) identity.

In the humorous and absurd road trip that structures *Vestlandet*, the novelist focuses on perceived regional differences between western Norway (Vestlandet) and eastern Norway (Østlandet). The perception of a real difference between eastern and western Norway has a very long history, dating back at least as far as Erik Pontoppidan's *Forsøg paa Norges Naturlige Historie* from 1752–3, according to Sigrid Bø Grønstøl (2006, 206). Historically, Vestlandet was politically and economically dominant, primarily through the authority of the Hanseatic town of Bergen, which was a gateway to the North Atlantic and the rest of Europe. Starting in the 1800s, however, Østlandet dramatically increased its economic, political, and cultural hegemony, leaving a power vacuum in the western part of the country. This change in the region's status appears to have prompted an outpouring of artistic creativity connected to memory, loss, cultural identity, and the landscape. A number of Norway's most acclaimed writers hail from and write about Vestlandet in ways that explore and celebrate the otherness of the region. Nødtvedt engages directly and humorously with this literary legacy.

In the following, I examine Nødtvedt's activation of the landscape and cultural figures of Vestlandet and investigate how he creates what Michel Foucault would call a heterotopia of "indefinitely accumulating time" (1986, 26), a carefully curated "cultural archive" in the sense suggested by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* that is activated in a struggle against imperialistic power (1993, xxiii). Nødtvedt expresses this both by inserting living and dead literary figures into the landscape that his two protagonists traverse, as well as by suggesting the inaccessibility of Vestlandet to cultural outsiders – including Norwegians from other regions – through a marked contrast between the rich topography of Vestlandet and the ostensible emptiness of the rest of the country.

Paradoxically, perhaps, Nødtvedt simultaneously activates a second kind of Foucauldian "other space," namely the "heterotopia of the festival" that celebrates the "absolutely temporal" and the most fleeting moments in time (1986, 26). *Vestlandet* is a profoundly carnivalesque novel that upends what might otherwise become stultifying nostalgia and instead maps out a dynamic and vibrant cultural archive inscribed in the landscape itself. Through the picaresque journey of the protagonists, all of Vestlandet becomes a vast festival, infinitely more vivid and fertile than the rest of Norway.

Before turning to the novel itself, it may be useful to provide a brief introduction to the author. Nødtvedt, who was born in 1984, debuted in 2008 with a book of poetry entitled *Harudes*.² He published two other poetry collections, *Bergens beskrivelse* (2011) and *Trollsuiten* (2014) before releasing his first novel, *Vestlandet*, in 2017. More recent works include *Slekter* (2019), which is a return to poetic form, and *Mordet på Henrik Ibsen* (2021), a novel that is a comical revisionist history of the dramatist's years living and working in Bergen (1851–7). Regardless of genre, Nødtvedt's literary production is marked by three preoccupations: 1) the appropriation of archaic textual sources and language; 2) topography and landscape; and 3) absurd and carnivalesque humor juxtaposing high and low culture. Hailing from Bergen, Nødtvedt writes in a relatively conservative *bokmål* form, while at the same time strongly engaging with the many important writers from across Vestlandet who typically write in *nynorsk*.

In his books, Nødtvedt activates and enters into dialog with many writers from Western Norway, ranging from early modern figures like Beyer, Dorothe Engelbrettdatter (1634–1716) and Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754), to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers like Arne Garborg (1851–1924), Per Sivle (1857–1904), Olav Nygard (1884–1924), and Olav H. Hauge (1908–94), to more contemporary

² The title comes from the Latin name for the Germanic tribe believed to have populated Hordaland.

writers such as Rolf Sagen (1940–2017), Cecilie Løveid (1951–), Ragnar Hovland (1952–), and Jon Fosse (1959–), among many others. The common element that links him to this otherwise quite diverse group of writers is an intense connection to the landscape, history, and culture of Vestlandet.

At least two reviewers have been critical of how Nødtvedt delimits Vestlandet as a geographical entity. Like the new administrative district (*fylke*) that arose out of Norway's so-called "regional reform" in 2017, Nødtvedt appears to reduce Vestlandet to only Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane, leaving out both Rogaland to the south and Møre og Romsdal to the north.³ Both Eivind Myklebust and Oddbjørn Magne Melle find it problematic that Nødtvedt skips the home tract of Ivar Aasen, the father of the *nynorsk* language, especially given that *Vestlandet* appears to function as what Myklebust calls a "kulturelt kanoniseringsprosjekt" (2017, 151; see also Melle 2018, 356).

Being a native of Bergen complicates Nødtvedt's relationship to this landscape. Bergen occupies a rather complex position within the collective identity of Vestlandet (and within the novel *Vestlandet*) because of the inherent power imbalance between the city and the countryside. While united with the rest of Vestlandet against the hegemony of eastern Norway, Bergen is nonetheless viewed with a certain degree of skepticism simply because it is – relatively speaking – an urban center of power. That the vernacular language in Bergen is a conservative form of *bokmål* rather than one of the many dialectical variation of *nynorsk* typical of the region is but one of many important markers of difference that are highlighted and explored in the novel.

Form, Characters, Plot, Paratexts

Vestlandet is a relatively short novel divided into fourteen chapters. The title of each chapter designates major place names along the journey of the two protagonists, the first-person narrator Erlend and his buddy Yngve Pedersen. The title of the first chapter, "Bergen – Voss – Ulvik" is typical (9); it reads like a chapter heading in a tourist guide or like the name of a ferry route. Indeed, at one comic point in the novel, Erlend rattles off all the ferry routes he knows by heart, with names that appear impenetrable to readers not intimately familiar with the geography of

³ The new administrative districts officially came into effect 1 January 2020. For an overview of the regional reform with maps, see <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kommuner-og-regioner/regionreform/regionreform/nye-fylker/id2548426/>

Vestlandet, such as “Fjelberg-Sydnnes-Utbjoa-Skjersholmane” and “Rysjedalsvika-Rutledal-Krakhella” (126). Like a tourist guide, each chapter describes a specific route, as well as the landscape and cultural attractions associated with it. The protagonists’ stated aim for their road trip is as follows:

Vi skal foreta en rundreise, en sondering, vi skal kartlegge landskapet, tunnelene, kunstnerne, gamleveiene. Vi skal krysse fjorder, vi skal over fjell. Jeg skal skrive, Yngve skal male, vi skal bytte på å kjøre, gjennom det våte og steile, det svingete og bratte, vi skal innvies, det egentlige Vestlandet skal fanges. (10)

As a literary author and visual artist respectively, the two protagonists seek far more than a passive touristic experience of the cultural landscape or a pedagogical presentation of its contents in the form of a guidebook. Later in the novel Erlend describes their project as “en slags gravlegging, jeg mener kartlegging av ... Ja, si dét. Et slags kunst- og kultur prosjekt, eller snarere en pilgrimsreise” (81). The project is in fact more political than Erlend lets on here. The main antagonist in *Vestlandet* is the shadowy, allegorical figure of “Austmannen,” a representative of the imperialistic state, which ostensibly seeks to destroy all that is good about Vestlandet through its reforms.

The two protagonists write themselves into an (imaginary) anti-imperialistic political project that posits Vestlandet as an oppressed colony of imperialistic “Oslo-Norge” (47; 104; 175). They implicitly claim the role of archivists for this political project, documenting the culture and landscape they fear Oslo-Norway is destroying through its reforms and strategies for rationalization. Through the (real) novel that Erlend writes and the (fictive) paintings and sketches that Yngve produces throughout their journey, they construct a cultural archive of “det egentlige Vestlandet” (10) and bring to light its complex layers of meaning. The novel can be understood in terms of Said’s description of the role that narrative plays in geopolitical battles for hegemony:

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (Said 1993, xiii, italics original)

Along their journey, the protagonists encounter both direct anti-imperialist political action in the form of the fictive “Vestlandske frigjeringsfront” and complete withdrawal from the political arena in the form of an isolated enclave of “førebuuar” (94); neither approach appears viable, leaving discursive control over the

future of the land – perhaps metafictionally through *Vestlandet* itself, as a narrative that attempts to control the reader’s understanding of the territory of Vestlandet – as the most promising form of anti-imperialist activism.⁴ The irony here is that this tongue-in-cheek anti-imperialistic project takes place within the predominantly egalitarian welfare state of Norway, and the perceived oppressor is the culturally diverse capital city, which has the largest population of immigrants in the country.⁵ The presence of the preppers and the freedom front certainly raise the possibility of an underlying discourse of (white?) supremacy and disaffection in the novel. The only real reference to non-Norwegians in the novel is a passing comment about Eastern European criminality (135).

The critique of Oslo-based imperialism that underlies *Vestlandet* is grounded historically in the over-arching goal of the protagonists’ road trip. At the outset of the novel, they have stolen the skull of Anders Olson Lysne (1764–1803), a rebel from the village of Lærdal who was beheaded in Bergen for leading an uprising against authorities; their plan is to repatriate the skull during the annual market held in Lærdal, after first having taken it with them on a carnivalesque, pseudo-sacred translation of this secular relic from village to village across Vestlandet. Nødtvedt refers to Lysne on nearly every page of the novel, alternately calling him “St. Anders,” “vestlandsmartyren,” and “Andris Løsno” (the vernacular spelling of his name) and recounting various aspects of his life and death throughout. Along the way, they learn that Austmannen wants to steal the skull and put it on display in Oslo.

As a kind of cultural archive in itself, Nødtvedt’s novel makes active use of visual modalities in its paratexts to articulate the project. The image on the front cover is an inverted reproduction of a section of one of Norway’s most famous nineteenth-century paintings, J. C. Dahl’s national romantic masterpiece, “Fra Stalheim” (1842). That the reproduction is upside down calls to mind the reflection of a mountainous landscape in still water, suggesting the importance of an off-center or skewed perspective. In an interview held at the Norwegian Literature festival in Lillehammer in 2018, Nødtvedt confirmed that he intended for the inverted cover image to evoke the shifting and disorienting landscape that the protagonists traverse.⁶ Both the title and the author’s name are superimposed

⁴ *Vestlandet* also contains numerous self-reflexive and metafictional comments on its status as a novel.

⁵ “I absolutte tall er Oslo den kommunen i landet som flest personer har innvandret til. Siden 1990 har 266 000 personer innvandret til Oslo. Dette tilsvarer i underkant av 23 prosent av alle innvandringene til Norge i hele perioden” (Gulbrandsen et al. 2021, 22).

⁶ The interview is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/RUrMxdjDfGM>

over the image on the diagonal, which echoes the steep slopes and vertical drops in the fjord landscape of Vestlandet.

The photographic image of the back cover depicts two men standing on either side of a car with a human skull on the hood; the man to the left is clearly the actual author, Erlend O. Nødtvedt, while the car, skull, and other man in the photograph appear to be the Toyota Camry, Anders Lysne's Skull, and protagonist Yngve Pedersen from the novel.⁷ The car is nicknamed Rosinante, a clear reference to Cervantes and the picaresque tradition. The overall effect of the photograph is to strengthen the impression that the absurd events depicted in the novel are "real" rather than fictive. In an interview with Kjell Åsmund Sunde, Nødtvedt openly plays with the boundaries between fact and fiction; in response to Sunde's question about how much of the action depicted in the novel has actually taken place, Nødtvedt responds with tongue in cheek: "Praktisk talt alt har skjedd, men enkelte av episodane er noko tona ned" (Sunde 2017). As if to further underscore the absurd humor of the novel the inside back cover displays a photograph of a sheep looking quizzically into the camera, as if to evoke the encounter with sheep that is inevitable on any road trip through western Norway.

One final visual paratext, a rudimentary map of Vestlandet, requires further comment. The novel is embellished with a round map that represents a section of western Norway, with the ocean and fjords colored light gray and the islands and mainland a darker gray. The circular shape of the map suggests on the one hand a lens – a telescope, a microscope, or perhaps the iris shot of a silent film – and on the other hand medieval cartographic representations of the flat earth as a round disk. There are no roads or other topographical features on the map, other than fifteen place names. Some of these places are central to the journey, but far from all of them, while other highly significant places are absent. Notably, the island of Losna, which the narrator calls "Vestlandets genius loci" and which has its own chapter in the novel (discussed in further detail below) is not on the map (143).

Nødtvedt's use of the map as a paratext underscores a point made by J. Hillis Miller in his 1995 book, *Topographies*, namely that "[...] the landscape in a novel is not just an indifferent background within which the action takes place. The landscape is an essential determinant of that action" (16). Miller goes on to state that any novel "is a figurative mapping" (1995, 19). Building on the work of film scholar Tom Conley, Dan Ringgaard argues that "Det unikke ved kort er at de faktisk viser os hvor vi er, samtidig med at vi betragter stedet hvor vi er, udefra. Vi bevidner

⁷ The second man in the photograph is the poet Yngve Pedersen (1972–), whom Nødtvedt has transformed into a painter for the purposes of the novel.

vores eget fravær på det sted hvor vi står” (2010, 233). This double placement created by the map “løfter os ud af det styrede tidsforløb og gør det muligt at se andre mønstre og skemaer” (Ringgaard 2010, 237). And in fact, much of the project in *Vestlandet* might be said to be the construction or revealing of patterns and identities through a comparison of the map and the landscape itself.

As in other languages, Norwegian has the saying “kartet stemmer ikke med terrenget” (or just “kartet og terrenget” for short), which in popular usage means that one’s expectations or theories do not match reality.⁸ In the novel the phrase becomes literal; more than once the protagonists drive into a tunnel and come out at a different place than expected, at one point exclaiming: “så var det igjen dette med kartet og terrenget, og nå stemmer ikke terrenget med terrenget” (63). The problem of the relationship between maps and reality has a long literary history, made famous in Jorge Luis Borges’s 1946 short story, “Del rigor en la ciencia” (“On Exactitude in Science”), in which the only sufficient map is one that is on a one-to-one scale with the world it depicts. Delightfully, the map in Borges’s story falls out of use but can still be found in fragments that shelter humans and other living beings. I see Nødtvedt’s *Vestlandet* as a contribution to the exploration of the narrative possibilities of cartography, and the paratextual map calls attention to this metafictionally; the novel’s contribution lies in the author’s playful exploration of heterotopian places alongside contrasting dystopian and utopian spaces, some of which cannot be fixed precisely on a map, but all of which represent lived experiences and perceptions in the world.

Indefinitely Accumulating Time

I am by no means the first person to suggest a heterotopian reading of Nødtvedt’s work. Mads B. Claudi presents a Foucauldian interpretation of Nødtvedt’s earlier poetry collection, *Bergens beskrivelse*, in an article from 2014. Much of what Claudi writes about *Bergens beskrivelse* applies to *Vestlandet* as well. He notes, for example, that “Nødtvedts heterotopiske landskap – nettopp ved å insistere på sin egen ikke-virkelighet og sin annerledeshet vis-à-vis vår vanlige måte å oppfatte stedet på – bidrar til å underliggjøre stedet og avautomatisere persepsjonen av våre romlige omgivelser” (Claudi 2014, 86). Yet as Claudi makes clear, the point is not to make the familiar unfamiliar in the sense of alienating; on the contrary,

⁸ The phrase is probably ultimately derived from philosopher Alfred Korzbyski’s writings on the subject in the 1930s. It gained renewed popularity with the publication of Michel Houellebecq’s 2010 novel, *La carte et le territoire*.

Nødtvedt plays consciously with perceptions of time, space, and language in order to “undersøke og understreke stedets betydning for individet” and fill the place with personal meaning (Claudi 2014, 87). But while *Bergens beskrivelse* remains primarily an exploration of the poetic I’s personal identity as it relates to place, in *Vestlandet* Nødtvedt broadens the scope to encompass a sense of regional identity.

Foucault exemplifies his first category of the heterotopia – “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time” – with institutions such as museums and libraries, explaining:

[...] the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century. (1986, 26)

This impulse was also manifested in early modern topographical literature, such as *Om Norgis Rige*, which sought to register all aspects of life and landscape. It seems to me that Nødtvedt’s project in *Vestlandet* is precisely this kind of “perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time,” in the sense that he layers cultural figures, events, and experiences from throughout history within the bounded landscape – or “immobile place” – of Vestlandet, turning it into a “cultural archive” that he harnesses for the novel’s underlying ideological critique of eastern Norwegian imperialism.

The goal of comprehensiveness also makes it natural to include both high and low cultural artifacts, figures, and texts in the collection, as signaled by the novel’s two contrasting epigraphs. The first is a long citation from governor (*stattholder*) Ulrik Frederik Gyldenløve’s (1638–1704) highly dismissive description of the western Norwegian landscape from a journey in 1696, while the second is a line from Norway’s winning song in the 2016 “Melodi Grand Prix Nordic” contest for children, which shares the same title as Nødtvedt’s novel, “Vestlandet.” Both epigraphs have an important place in the cultural archive of Vestlandet; the former represents the contempt with which the region was regarded by the central powers, while the latter is a naive but genuine and home-grown declaration of love for the region (and the first ever winning entry composed in *nynorsk*).⁹ Notably, both *Vestlandet* and the song “Vestlandet” might be viewed as modern-day examples of the archaic genre of the *encomium*, perhaps the most notable

⁹ “Over eit fjell, gjennom ein tunnel, / over ei bru, ja, der bur du. / Håper du veit kor heldig du e, / du bur på Vestlandet” (by Vilde Hjelle and Anna Naustdal).

Norwegian example of which is Dass's *Nordlands Trompet*. Regarding the latter, Hanne Lauvstad points out "Som *encomium* er verket på samme tid en formidling av fakta om nordlandsk topografi, natur, næringsveier, folkeliv og språk og en litterær utforming av disse motiver i pakt med samtidens retorisk-litterære normer" (2005, 20). Much the same could be said of Nødtvedt's *Vestlandet* today.

If we understand all of *Vestlandet* as a single, vast heterotopian archive, it makes no difference whatsoever to the protagonists that, for example, the poet Olav H. Hauge died in 1994; it is completely possible to have a meaningful interaction with him years after his death. While the informed reader finds a comment like "Vi trenger å få malt et portrett til samlingen. Og få Olav H. Hauge i tale" humorous because it is impossible, on another level the statement is both serious and realistic in the sense that Hauge is as present in the novel as any other character, fictive or historical (18). When they peek through the windows of Hauge's closed-down house and find the furniture covered in sheets, the protagonists do not interpret this as a sign of death or passing time. Instead, they decide it is a diversionary tactic to discourage the many visitors who seek an audience with the poet. Like innumerable other tourists who make the pilgrimage to Hauge's home, the protagonists have read his diaries, where Hauge made a note of everyone who came to visit, and they cannot resist the desire to become a part of his world. Appropriating the poet's own words, the narrator says "Det er den draumen me ber på, å bli skrevet inn i dagboken til Olav H. Hauge" (19).¹⁰ Thus both the poet and his poetry are inscribed into the cultural archive of *Vestlandet* because the "we" extends to the protagonists themselves, who also "carry the dream" of meeting Hauge, and moreover are able to do so.

Through his peripheral vision Erlend sees "i sidesynet en skikkelse i en seng innebygget i veggen en nesten gjennomsiktig kontur i et laken en naken eldre mann han reiser seg han står i egen skikkelse foran gruen" and at one point they even feel his breath on their necks (25–26). The vision retreats, but not before Yngve is able to paint a portrait of Hauge that he later displays at the Lærdal market (182). The protagonists have similar encounters with other long dead literary figures, such as Olav Nygard, whom Erlend meets alone in Fjærland (73–74) and together with Yngve in Modalen (149–150). Again, Nødtvedt emplaces these encounters within a culturally significant landscape and merges intertextual literary references with a sensory, physical encounter with someone from outside of

10 Hauge's poem "Det er den draumen" is from the 1966 collection *Droper i austavind* and was voted Norway's best poem in 2016 (https://www.nrk.no/kultur/_det-er-den-draumen_-ernorges-beste-dikt-1.13140034). It is symptomatic of the popular desire to become a part of Hauge's world that his diary has been reactivated through the social media platform Twitter, where excerpts are posted regularly: https://twitter.com/OHHauge_dagbok

time; in the case of Nygard, the poet gives them part of a fiddle that he has carved, a physical manifestation of the dead poet that serves as evidence of his continued existence within the heterotopia of indefinitely accumulating time.

The insertion of Gjest Baardsen (1791–1849) into the cultural archive of Vestlandet adds another historical and economic dimension to the narrative. Baardsen was an infamous criminal and popular hero during his lifetime, a reputation that he himself cultivated through his literary production, which was largely autobiographical. While out walking in the hills above Skjerdal with Eline Raudberget, one of the many ostensibly authentic Western Norwegians who guide the protagonists at various points in the novel, Erlend catches a glimpse of a man climbing down from the mountains, pursued by dogs. Unlike with Hauge and Nygard, Erlend does not encounter this man, whom he recognizes as a thief on the run, physically. Although Baardsen remains a disembodied vision, only moments after seeing him Erlend falls and gets his foot stuck between two stones, in the exact location where he has just seen Baardsen as he “lener seg over skatten sin, kikker seg over skuldrene før han seremonielt senker en kaffikjel ned i hullet mellom steinene og dekker til, han tar et øyeblikk og memorerer stedet, et slags ansikt i steinen, han haster videre og kommer aldri tilbake [...]” (58). As he struggles to get his foot free, Erlend sees that same face in the stone and with the help of Eline eventually dislodges Baardsen’s coffee pot, which is filled with silver coins (58–59).

In a sequence that clearly shows the difference between Erlend’s more urban approach and the “true” western Norwegian attitude represented by Eline, he sees the treasure as a valuable “historisk funn” that should be reported to the authorities. In response to this he gets a lecture:

Det er enkelte ting me berre held kjeft om, enkelt og greit. Antikvariske myndigheiter, viltoppsynsmenn, fut og prest, alt som fins av embedsmenn, det er fenomen me sant å seie ikkje er vidare interesserte i her inne i gamle Såggen [Sogn]. Pilespissar frå steinalderen, huldresylver, Gjest Baardsen-mynt og slike ting høyrer heime på peishyllene våre, ikkje på utstilling i Bergen eller i den forbanna hovudstaden. (59)

Here we see that the people of Vestlandet have been quietly participating in a collective but highly secretive project of compiling their own history, protecting it from the imperialist interventions of Oslo-Norway. Moreover, in the novel the coins that Erlend finds are essentially no big deal, having become a common unit of exchange known as “sognedaler” that are used informally as vouchers for drinks at festivals like those in Fjærland and Lærdal and for informal bribes; they represent a shadow economy outside the reach of Oslo-Norway. This sequence suggests that Vestlandet as a heterotopia functions as a subversive living cultural archive operating with its own rules and economy, outside the mainstream.

The Festival

Given that Erlend and Yngve consume enormous quantities of alcohol throughout the novel, one might argue that their entire road trip is one continuous festival. Even so, Nødtvedt interrupts the journey with three proper festive events, the “Boknatti” festival in Fjærland, the cultural evening hosted by the “Vestlandske frigeringsfront” in Ålhus, and the “Lærdalsmarknad” that is the end goal of the trip. I see these as instances of what Foucault calls heterotopias of “time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect,” which is to say, “time in the mode of the festival” (1986, 26). Unfortunately, Foucault does not elaborate more on the festival heterotopia in his essay. Speaking more generally, Foucault claims that heterotopias have one of two functions in relation to all the other spaces in the world:

Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation [...]. (1986, 27)

In my reading of *Vestlandet* through the lens of Foucault, it seems clear that the festivals function as heterotopias of compensation, but it is a reversed, carnivalesque form of compensation in which the festival is actually more “messy, ill constructed and jumbled” than the real space we occupy in the everyday. Rather than being an idealized place, the festival functions as a space of connection, celebration, excess, and freedom that is more filled with life and meaning than normal spaces; ultimately, it can be argued that in the novel all of *Vestlandet* functions in the mode of the festival, and that it thus merges two types of heterotopias – the archive and the festival – into one chaotic, deeply layered “Other” space.

All three of the festivals in *Vestlandet* explicitly celebrate Western Norwegian culture and tradition. “Boknatti” is a (real) literary festival held outdoors each year in Fjærland, which also calls itself “bokbyen.”¹¹ The festival combines readings by and interviews with authors, concerts, and a marketplace where individuals can sell their own used books. In *Vestlandet*, the “Boknatti” festival functions as the only place in *Vestlandet* where eastern and western Norwegian people can meet and exchange ideas; they do so through the medium of literature. Nødtvedt makes a point of showing how the western audience receives eastern authors:

¹¹ See <https://bokbyen.no>

Det er rørende å merke sympatien publikum har for østlandsforfatterne, i kveld blir de ikke møtt med den sedvanlige likegyldigheten og nedlatende overbærenheten, på denne vakre kvelden blir de betraktet som søte, applausen er ikke helt ironisk, de betraktes som et småartig oppvarmingsband, det er forsoning i den vestlandske sommernatten. (69)

That Vestlandet is culturally superior is never in doubt here, and it represents a humorous (but still serious) reversal of the dominant cultural hierarchy in Norway, where Oslo unquestioningly claims the highest status. This sense of western superiority is further emphasized by a long lyrical passage depicting author Rolf Sagen's festival performance, in which he explicates the western landscape in a way that brings new insight to the protagonists.

As indicated above, the “Vestlandske frigjeringsfront” (VFF) is a fictive separatist movement that seeks to achieve political independence from the rest of Norway. Unlike Boknatti and Lærdalsmarknaden, the VFF cultural evening that Erlend and Yngve participate in was not originally on their itinerary. They are sent there by another character to deliver a goat that bleats in eastern Norwegian dialect, and that must therefore be sacrificed to the cause of western Norwegian independence. The evening is dominated by a performance of folk music played on the Hardanger fiddle, generally known as Norway's national instrument, although it is specifically associated with the folk music of Vestlandet. As with the book festival, what on the surface appears to be a rather dull cultural event is in fact a riveting experience for the protagonists that connects them viscerally and sensorily to the landscape and history of Vestlandet. In fact, the music is mediated by two (real) acclaimed contemporary musicians, Nils Økland and Sigbjørn Apeland who are known for their striking fusions of folk and more contemporary forms of music. In a sense, their work echoes Nødtvedt's larger literary project, which also seeks to erase the limits of time and form, merging different historical periods and modalities together in order to reveal the deep significance of local culture.

While on the one hand Økland and Apeland's music is an ephemeral, festive experience outside of time, on the other hand it also contributes to the cultural archive because it is the first public performance of a (fictive) rediscovered piece of music of great significance to the folk music tradition of Western Norway. It is a legendary “halling” – fiddle music for a specific type of dance – about Anders Lysne that has previously been referenced (again, fictively) by musicologists but not thought to have been recorded or transcribed. Through music alone, this “Løsnohalling” tells the story of Anders Lysne in a way that is experienced corporeally, and it accompanies the protagonists throughout the rest of their journey. While the cultural evening itself descends into a drunken blackout in which the protag-

onists lose the skull of Anders Lysne, at the same time it contains a pure, sensory experience that brings them into profound contact with the spirit of Vestlandet.

Lastly, we have Lærdalsmarknaden, the final destination for the protagonists, located in the home village of Anders Lysne, where they hope to repatriate his skull. It is a traditional market with booths selling, among other things, local handicrafts and traditional foods.¹² In the fictive universe of *Vestlandet*, however, Lærdalsmarknaden becomes a place of excess and sensory overload. Lest one think that Lærdalsmarknaden resembles a typical farmers' market, Nødvedt emphasizes the multiple dangers to life and limb it poses. The protagonists see “et tjuetall gråtende unger, farlig nær plassen der en vakker kvinne med bart og kronbunad står med pisk og en diger binne i bånd” and many adults who are:

[...] fraktet bort på båre, sannsynligvis døddrukne, nedtrampete eller knivstukne, eller sannsynligvis alt på en gang, det er vanskelig å se om de er døde eller levende der de ligger utstrakte på bårene med fårete smil om munnen, det er lettere å gjette i tilfellene der korpene er dekt med hvite laken. Ennå er det bare formiddag. (172).

The implication is that it is here that all of Vestlandet gathers in a wild display of authentic regional identity, accessed through real places in the landscape, that marks them as essentially different from the rest of Norway, and ostensibly rational Østlandet in particular. Ultimately, the two Foucauldian heterotopians of infinitely accumulating time and the timeless festival are united in the novel through Nødvedt's activation of the carnivalesque and comedic, essentially turning the cultural archive itself into the locus of a transgressive, multi-layered, and endless festival.

Out of Place: Østlandet versus Losna

Within the topography of *Vestlandet* there are two places that distinguish themselves from all the other loci in the text because of their separate status. In different ways, they take the protagonists out of the heterotopian landscape. These two places are polar opposites, with Østlandet functioning as a dystopia that represents everything the protagonists resist, while the island of Losna functions as a utopian vision of Vestlandet perfected.

Østlandet as a whole functions as a non-place in the sense identified by anthropologist Marc Augé. Augé argues that “If a place can be defined as relational,

¹² See <https://laerdalsmarknaden.no>

historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (2008, 63). These non-places are products of super-modernity and are lacking in local culture and specificity, with anonymous hotel chains, hospitals, refugee camps, and supermarkets serving as examples. Nødtvedt himself uses the phrase “ikke-sted” to describe one of the many tunnels the protagonists drive through and despise because they view them as part of Oslo-Norway’s regime of rationalization and efficiency that threatens to destroy any authentic sense of place in Vestlandet (43).

In the fictive universe of *Vestlandet*, Østlandet is both a product of and a creator of a super-modern, capitalistic way of being in the world that has lost all connection with history and identity. We see this clearly expressed in the thirteenth chapter, “Halne – Geilo – Ål – Gol – Hemsedal – Fylkesgrensen,” in which the protagonists take a detour that requires that they leave Vestlandet and drive 170 kilometers through Østlandet in order to reach their final destination of Lærdal. This “chapter” consists of only two words: “17 mil,” suggesting that in the dystopian non-place of Østlandet the topography consists only of empty, abstract distance rather than place imbued with meaning and history (162).

Earlier in the novel, the protagonists see a portent of Oslo-Norway’s imperialistic ambition in an “austlandsenklave” located on the far side of a river named Lo, which does not appear to correspond to the actual river by that name (96). Even though it is still within the borders of Vestlandet, the other side of the river suggests a coming apocalypse. Their guide, the fictive Larine Litlenova, uses the natural devastation allegorically to illustrate the evils of Østlandet:

Det er for det meste planta sitkagran på hi sida. Helvetes pøbelgran frå Austlandet skjemmer allereie store delar av Vestlandet, men over elva har han overteke fullstendig. Dei granane øydelegg all annan flora, skogbotnen er heilt daud. Sånn sett eit passande bilete på sentral-makta som vil skapa eit heilt einsarta, goldt samfunn. (98–99)

While the allegory here is heavy-handed, it suits the monomania of the leader of a group of preppers, and it helps the protagonists to see that the encroaching danger is not just cultural, but also environmental.

Erlend comments “Jeg forstår hva Larine mener med enklave, det er som en liten del av østlandsnaturen har erobret vestlandsnaturen her, vi er i et fremmed element og føler oss langt hjemmefra” (99). The dystopian enclave consists not only of environmental destruction, but also of the people who populate it, the descendants of “embedsmennene” – the government officials that held power in nineteenth-century Norwegian society – who, according to Larine Litlenova, “blei fordrivne i gammel tid” and who “kom seg unna og etablerte seg i små samfunn på

feil side av Lo-elva. Det er faen meg fullstendig dansketid der inne” (96). By linking the government officials to the specter of the age of Danish rule in this way, Nødtvedt aligns his contemporary regionalism not only with anti-imperialism, but also with nineteenth-century national romanticism, which aimed to identify a uniquely Norwegian identity separate from that of Denmark. This move is, however, complicated not only by the largely positive way that the Danish crown was portrayed in early modern topographical literature, but also by the role played by writers such as Beyer and Dass themselves.

There is an inherent irony in Nødtvedt’s admiration for a figure like Beyer and Beyer’s actual status as one of an elite group of “tjenere for enevoldstaten”; Nødtvedt’s satirical portrayal of the *embetsstand* contrasts starkly with what we see in, for example *Nordlands Trompet*, where these servants of the state are presented as exemplary (Lauvstad 2005, 228). As Andersen points out, “[d]en topografiske litteraturen hadde [...] embetsmessig grunnlag” because it arose out of the requirement that pastors, who made up a key part of the *embetsstand*, “innberette til myndighetene om tilstanden i sitt distrikt” (2012, 116). That Beyer and especially Dass were able to transform this bureaucratic task into a literary form with striking aesthetic qualities does not erase their status as integral parts of the same centralized power apparatus that Nødtvedt seeks to critique.

In contrast to Østlandet, Nødtvedt sets up the island of Losna as its utopian opposite. The chapter in which it appears differs from the others in that its title contains only one place name, suggesting that it is geographically disconnected from the rest of the itinerary. The protagonists are taken there by Jon Fosse, whom the narrator describes as “en av de mest vestlandske av alle vestlendinger” (142). The protagonists stow away on Fosse’s speedboat, and thus do not navigate the journey to Losna themselves. It is also unclear how they return to the mainland after their visit, or where they actually make land. Losna itself is described in the novel as “vestlendingenes hellige øy” (143). Nødtvedt uses religious metaphors throughout the brief chapter: Jon Fosse “styrer etter sitt indre kompass, som ledet av Gud” and the heavy fog that engulfs them “må være sløret, dette må være Sognesjøens svar på de dunstene orakelet i Delfi innåndet” (143). The narrator catches only a glimpse of the island through the fog, which he describes in one of the many trance-like, lyrical passages without punctuation in the novel:

[...] jeg skimter en naustrekke i fjæren og foran naustene et høytidelig svartkledd folkeferd, skaut og hatter, de står der stille kvinner med barn i armene unge jenter unge gutter gamle menn og gamle damer de er uten ansikter utviskete som på gamle fotografier urørlige i klynger vendt mot fjorden mine formødre og mine forfedre er det og alle livene deres samler seg i meg går gjennom meg all deres glede og all deres sorg alle fødsler hver eneste død og regnet og bålet og vinden og båten og husene og naustene og forlisene og steinsprangene og løpske hester og bakkene bratte tunge steinheller og sildetønner og Gud og Jesus og de hvite

kirkene og gravsteinene og fra langt inne i landet, innerst i verdens lengste fjord hører vi ljøsnohallingen går, ljøsnohallingen den kaller og går. (144)

This is the opposite of the non-places described by Augé; in fact, the reference to “shipwrecks” links *Vestlandet* to one of the oldest texts in the literature of Vestlandet, the runic inscription on the Eggja stone from Sogndal (Grønstøl 2006, 198). Losna is almost entirely relational and intimately linked to Erlend through his personal family history because it is populated by the ghosts of the narrator’s ancestors, who seem to line up in a vision to greet him. He gains Jon Fosse’s undivided attention when he reveals that he has roots on Losna: “Jon Fosse setter sitt dypeste blikk i meg når jeg nevner at jeg er av Losna-ætt” (143). This particular passage points forward to the 2019 poetry collection *Slekter*, in which Nødtvedt meditates on (and plays with) ancestry in a way that echoes the use of topography in his earlier work (as well as Solstad’s novel), but it also functions as a utopian vision of a pure and true notion of Vestlandet inhabited by hardworking generations who live, work, pray, and die in intense communion with the land. Jørgen Severin Breck Einarsen points out that the style of the passage resembles that of Jon Fosse’s prose (2020, 44), while Anna Sambor connects it both to Fosse’s characteristic style and to Grønstøl’s notion of “vestlandsk surrealisme” more generally (2020, 40). The vision is accompanied by the sound of “Ljøsnohallingen,” the fiddle tune discussed above, which produces a trance-like state that brings the narrator into contact with the past whenever it is played in the narrative.

In his master’s thesis on the novel, Einarsen claims that “Losna fungerer som en sammenfatning av all historien Erlend har observert og samlet på sin ferd rundt omkring på Vestlandet” (2020, 44). Yet this reading does not account for the contrast between Erlend’s pietistic vision of Losna and the wildly carnivalesque nature of the rest of the journey. Nødtvedt repeatedly hammers home the excessive drinking of the protagonists and the absurd antics of the people they encounter. Nødtvedt seems to want to reinsert the anonymous pietists from Erlend’s vision of Losna into the novel as a radical, almost atavistic orthodox alternative to the modern Vestlandet portrayed in virtually every other passage. A salient example of how Nødtvedt portrays contemporary western Norwegians can be seen in the members of VFF, whose cultural evening evolves into a “sanseløst kultisk opptog med overstadige separatister i slåtteekestase” (113). In stark contrast to this bacchanalian excess, traditionally speaking Vestlandet was known for its “religiøs pietisme, frihaldsfanatisme og målstrev” (Øidne 1957, 99).¹³ Losna thus appears

¹³ “Målstrev” refers to the long-standing activism promoting *nynorsk* and seeking to strengthen its position in Norwegian public discourse.

less as a “sammenfatning” of the layers of history brought to life through the protagonists’ encounters with people and places on their road trip than a static utopia outside of space and time.

The pietism of Vestlandet was believed to have arisen out of the sublime but dangerous landscape itself, as one nineteenth-century writer explains: “Det siger sig dog selv, at Religiøsiteten under denne mørke Natur ogsaa let vil faa Noget af dens haarde og vilde Karakter” (Elster 1872, 23). In some sense, with its evocation of the symbiotic relationship between faceless, hard-working people and the rugged natural environment, the vision of Losna provides what may well be the most historically accurate representation of “det egentlige Vestlandet” in the novel. Yet, the fact that the protagonists never actually set foot on the island is important; Losna appears dream-like, presented through the visual metaphors of fog, veil, and faded photograph. Within the context of the novel, it is not a place the protagonists can visit, even though it actually exists in the real world. Instead, it becomes a utopia, and as Foucault explains:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. (1986, 24)

Within the context of the novel, the “hellige øy” of Losna functions as a perfected and thus unattainable form of Vestlandet.

Falling into Place: from *bokmål* to *nynorsk*

Notably, Erlend senses that his vision of Losna “har fått meg til å innse noe vesentlig. Jon Fosse har trukket et slør vekk. Jeg forstår hva jeg må gjøre, hvordan jeg skal komme gjennom og forbi. Men ikke ennå” (145). This insight relates specifically to the question of language, and the passage foreshadows Erlend’s transition from *bokmål* to *nynorsk* in the final pages of the novel. The transition takes place in the middle of an absurdly long run-on sentence that reflects Erlend’s rage during a confrontation with an (evil) *embetsmann* at Lærdalsmarknaden:

[...] der og da forstår jeg at det ikke nytter lenger, jeg tar hintet, jeg gjør som Jon Fosse overbeviste meg om, tar konsekvensen av Olav Nygard, dette språket duger ikke lenger, jeg kan ikke lenger skrive embedsmennes språk, kan ikke lenger bruke dette reklamespråket, dette gjennomfalske maktpråket, dette språket som umerkelig inntvinger alt under den instrumentelle østlandsfornuft, dette heslige bokmålet, nei, det går berre ikkje lenger [...]. (185-6)

Language represents the final barrier that needs to be broken, the last tie to the imperialist project of Oslo-Norway he needs to cut before the protagonist can become fully integrated into the “real” Vestlandet. Erlend is literally and figuratively taken by storm, as a hurricane forms the backdrop of his linguistic conversion, and the rest of the novel is written in *nynorsk*.

The novel ends with Erlend finally drinking from a bottle of the hard cider stolen from Olav H. Hauge’s cellar as he is engulfed in a landslide. The intertextual resonances with Henrik Ibsen’s *Brand* (1866) and *Når vi døde vågner* (1899), which both end in apparently fatal avalanches, are surely deliberate here. *Brand* especially is among other things a meditation on the extremes of the western Norwegian landscape and mentality, perhaps a dark negative to the brighter image that Nødtvedt seeks to develop. Indeed, while the endings of the two Ibsen dramas are marked by rhetorical shifts to ambivalent expressions of a kind of Christian resolution (a disembodied voice calling “Han er deus caritatis!” in *Brand* and the ominous deaconess’s “Pax vobiscum!” in *Når vi døde vågner*), in *Vestlandet* we see a shift from prose to poetry, given voice by the protagonist himself. Symptomatically, Brand, Gerd, Rubek, and Irene appear to perish in the snow, while it seems probable within the absurd logic of *Vestlandet* that Erlend survives the landslide.

Erlend’s last words – and indeed the last words of the novel – are a poem that is syntactically fragmented but suggests that he is becoming one with the landscape, or with the “real” Vestlandet:

eg opnar augo
 det vårast når eg bortover
 drivkvit asfalt går
 på Vestlandet
 heime (191)

The final lines of the poem are transformational for the novel as a whole. No longer merely a heterotopian accumulation of time and place merging with a carnivalesque festival outside of time, the protagonist finally opens his eyes and recognizes Vestlandet for what it truly is, home. It is a reminder of Miller’s insight regarding the connections between humans and the environment: “The landscape is not a pre-existing thing in itself. It is made into a landscape, that is into a humanly meaningful space, by the living that takes place within it” (1995, 21). That the language of the poem is *nynorsk* connects the protagonist both to his pietistic ancestors from Losna and to the numerous characters he encounters along the journey. By transitioning to *nynorsk* he becomes more authentically a part of Vestlandet, where “målstrevet” is the last of the three pillars of Western Norwegian

identity still standing after pietism and alcohol abstinence have fallen to the wayside. *Vestlandet*, like topographical literature more generally, is landscape lived through language.

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