



# Stavanger, Pre- and Postmodern: Øyvind Rimbereid's Poetry and the Tradition of Topographic Verse

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In this chapter, I will suggest a reading of two quite unique contemporary Scandinavian long poems, using topographic verse, a tradition predating Romanticism, to shed light on the specific way in which the concept of place is unveiled in them. Because the tradition of topographic literature approaches the questions of place and space in ways we are not familiar with today, the presentation of this tradition's main features may in itself be seen as an interesting, perhaps even necessary, supplement to current theoretical developments on these topics. The main point of my reading, however, is to show that the deliberations on the genre of topographic verse, with the implications that follow from this perspective, will make it possible to identify how the poems in question position themselves as transposings of premodern thinking onto postmodern society.

Øyvind Rimbereid (b. 1966) is arguably the most celebrated poet in Norway today. He debuted in 1993, with the first of three books of prose fiction published in that decade. These were all relatively short works of

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high-quality literature; they were well received by critics and in glimpses were very good, but all in all they were not particularly out of the ordinary. Then he changed from prose to poetry, with *Seine topografier* (2000; “Late Topographies”), followed by *Trådreiser* (2003; “Thread-travels”). These books placed Rimbereid in the vanguard of Norwegian literature and paved the way for his masterpiece, *Solaris korrigert* (2004; “Solaris Corrected”), which as early as 2007 was regarded as one of the 24 most important Norwegian works of literature in history. Since then he has published a further four books of poetry, of which *Jimmen* (2011) has received by far the largest amount of acclaim.

*Late Topographies*, *Solaris Corrected* and *Jimmen* all depict Rimbereid’s hometown Stavanger on Norway’s southwestern coast, and they are all written in some form of Stavanger dialect. In this, Rimbereid has opened up something of a small wave of dialect poetry in Norway.<sup>1</sup> It may also be argued that he has had an influence on the growing number of Norwegian poems written in the long poem tradition, as the title poem of *Solaris Corrected* spans 37 pages and *Jimmen* has one 54-page-long text.

But why long poems about Stavanger?

Rimbereid finished his university studies in 1994, with a master’s thesis focusing solely on the Swedish poet Göran Sonnevi’s long poem “Sjostakovitj, 1976” (1979). As a student, he was an active member of a small society, the Rhetorical forum (Retorisk forum), in which Georg Johannesen (1931–2005) was the central figure. Johannesen was himself a brilliant poet, a former literature researcher and the most prominent expert on rhetorics in Norway. After deconstruction and French feminism lost their momentum, rhetorics became the *it* thing to do in humanistic faculties across Scandinavia at this time.

If there is one thing that sets the interest in rhetorics in Norway apart from the rest of Scandinavia, it is a smaller degree of interest in the theory of public speech as found in the classics like Cicero and Quintilian, and a much greater interest in various genres of text, speech and language-centered philosophy that occurs after this, all the way up to rhetorics falling out of favor when Romanticism sets in. Among these other genres are several forms of literature from before Romanticism which have fallen under the horizon of common understanding of what literature is: genres like homiletics (the theory of religious preaching), epistolography (the theory of writing letters) and so on. Of the more literary genres, topographic literature is probably the most noticeable, along with religious psalms. As I have written in my doctoral thesis *Kroppsmøderne* (2005;

“Body Modernism”), the focus on the body in the Scandinavian literature of the 1980s gave way to an increased interest in the spatial area toward the end of the decade that followed. As in the 1980s, the 1990s poems tend to be short. They identify a smaller place, say a garden, and use it as a starting point for a phenomenological exploration of the way we conceptualize the world through interaction with it.

Against this backdrop of the currents of the time and of personal interests, it is easy to see the logic of Rimbereid’s choice in turning to long poems dealing with the Stavanger area. Especially if one considers the often-repeated mantra in the 1990s that postmodern literature had changed from quoting earlier modernist form to quoting pre-Romantic form: “Late topographies” may be read as “late *modern* topographies,” thus implying the term late modernism as it is often used instead of postmodernism.

### TOPOGRAPHIC VERSE

In an essay from 2006, Rimbereid himself makes public the connection most relevant to us. The essay’s title is “Om det topografiske diktet. Eller i stedet for en poetikk” (“On the topographic poem. Or instead of a literary program”). This text is first published in Rimbereid’s up until now only collection of essays, *Hvorfor ensomt leve* (2006; “Why live in solitude”).

The topic of his essay is not the topographic poem as this term is understood in the English tradition, where it covers poems of the seventeenth and eighteenth century describing parks and the like. What Rimbereid is referring to in his title is what one would call topographic *verse*, although he actually writes at least as much about prose in his essay.

This literary program opens with a longer paragraph called “Stedet i mennesket” (“Place in man”). We are presented with the following description of the relationship between the literature he is about to describe, and the program behind his own writing:

Poetikk? Ikke presist. Heller: Om det som finnes under skriften min, som motiv og tradisjon, idet diktet slynger seg nedover pc-skjermen. Denne opplyst poetiske mellomverdenen, som selv forsøker å slynge et lys over en verden der ute, en verden som i mitt tilfelle ofte har handlet om steder, byer, landskap og geografier—konkret og faktisk, med si fortid, nåtid og framtid. (Rimbereid 2006, 79)

Literary program? Not quite. Rather: On that which lies underneath my writing, as motif and tradition, as the poem meanders itself downwards on the PC screen. This illuminated, poetic middle world, which itself tries to shed a light on a world out there, a world which in my case has often been about places, cities, landscapes and geographies—specific and factual, with its past, present and future. (Trans. HOA)

As a present-day writer, Rimbereid approaches his writing with a modern understanding of creativity, society and humanity. The topographic literature predating Romanticism, he describes, is a tradition which inspires him, which he writes himself into, partly in the sense that his own texts may be seen as a continuation or an update of it, and partly in the sense that it provides ways of writing which, when used again today, provides both interesting form and interesting perspectives. Rimbereid's poems are results of a fruitful dialogue between the author and his horizon on the one hand, and the topographic tradition on the other.

Rimbereid's essay, quoted above, then continues with a presentation of a number of *exempla* from the Norwegian wing of this tradition. He starts with prose, and I paraphrase:

1. Olaus Magnus: *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555). The text is written in Rome, where Olaus was exiled after the reformation. This description of the North focuses on culture and commercial life, plus military-strategic advice and insights, as it is possibly meant as preparation for a counter-reformation. But it is also filled with melancholia. In this text, we are presented with a new way of composition, with points toward later poetic works: thematic rather than chronological organization. Topics are placed paratactically, side by side, and each topic draws in a lot of anecdotal detail.
2. Absalon Pederssøn Beyer: *Om Norigs rige* (1567; "On the Country of Norway"). This is probably written as part of the ongoing conflict with the Hanseatic League. Classic rhetorics are in use, including the view of the world as a human life, with its current state described as old and sleepy. Digressions and anecdotes occur *en masse*.
3. NN: *Hamarkroniken* (probably around 1570; "The Hamar Chronicle"). Hamar, where the Catholic bishop had his seat until the Reformation in 1536, is described as being in its terminal stage. The text takes the shape of an elegy and/or an ode, although it does not conclude in heaven, but on earth. The structuring element is a

wanderer who explains what he sees, the focus being on the actual topography. This is an unstable world, where magic and superstitions are included.

After these prose texts, Rimbereid turns to poetry. I continue paraphrasing:

Poetry was first written in Latin, as it was not yet understood how to make metric verse in Germanic languages. “Diktverkene ble tenkt og komponert ut fra et likhetsprinsipp som kan virke fremmed sett med et moderne blikk, som helst oppsplitter verden. Genrene fungerte den gang som arenaer mer for tematiske kombinasjoner og kryssinger enn for kon-sentrater” (“The poems were conceived and composed based on principles of similarity that may seem strange from a modern perspective, which tends to divide the world. The genres at that time worked as arenas for combinations and crossings rather than areas of concentration”). (Rimbereid 2006, 109; Trans. HOA)

Rimbereid finishes with Petter Dass's *Nordlands trompet* (1739; “The Trumpet of Nordland”). This long poem has been seen as an authentic expression of the joy of mentioning, of bringing forth through language. There is a fuzzy border between inspiration from the Latin tradition and inspiration from folklore, local song traditions and more. I may add that to Norwegian readers, it is well known that this text opens by addressing everyone living in the recently populated county of Nordland, and goes on for a little short of 100 pages to describe various aspects of geography, commercial life, nature and so on.

As the essay presents the tradition in the mode of classic rhetorics, through *exempla* rather than synthesis, it will be more or less coincidental if more specific aspects of the tradition found in Rimbereid's poetry are actually mentioned in the essay. But before we continue our investigation by looking closer at *Solaris Corrected* and *Jimmen*, there are two more general points to be made: First, topography in this tradition is to be understood in a wide sense, where all aspects of nature and culture are relevant. Second, there is a sense of urgency in these texts, related to the changing tides of history. Most if not all of the texts above are descriptions of topographies at times of dramatic societal change.

But first of all: How does this older tradition relate to the interest in place and space in recent years?

## PLACE AND SPACE IN TOPOGRAPHIC VERSE

If we are to understand how place and space are perceived in this older literature, we must bear in mind that it is written before phenomenology and before the Romantic or Kantian understanding of the sublime. Because topographic verse is older than Romanticism, it has no concept of a hypersensitive poetic subjectivity, and hence no interest in describing the reception of sensory data of chosen surroundings and the emotional response to these either.

The word “landscape” has its origin in the Golden Age of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century ([Oxford English Dictionary](#)). With a precursor in the more idyllic Italian painting of rural topography, this may be seen as the first time real or real-like topography is structured specifically in accordance with the human eye. Topography becomes landscape, the object changes from what is to what is perceived. This, one might say, is where the history leading to our understanding of place and space begins.

But if one looks closer at Golden Age paintings, they are, although staggeringly realistic compared to most if not all earlier art, still filled with elements that open up for potential interpretations. As a parallel to the *vanitas* motifs of the same era—these are after all Baroque paintings—the landscapes depicted often feature elements which might easily be seen as representations of human death. In his essay “Gjenferdets ruin” (1994; “The Ruin of the Ghost”), Norwegian writer Tor Ulven reflects on a ruin in a landscape by Jacob van Ruisdael (c. 1629–1682), one of the foremost Dutch painters of the seventeenth century:

Den er det arketyriske bildet på livets forgjengelighet og usselhet, den er omgitt av brukne trær, sprukne gravmæler, vann som strømmer og blir borte like ubønnhørlig som tiden går, og vi med den, henimot døden. (Ulven 1997, 162)

It is the archetypal image of life’s perishability and frailty, it is surrounded by broken trees and cracked grave inscriptions, water streaming and disappearing as unstoppable as time passes, and we with it, towards death. (Trans. HOA)

This coexistence of realism and allegory is very understandable if one contemplates how educated people of this time would be familiar with the *quadriga*, the system of reading the Bible on four different levels: moral, literal, allegorical (as an enhanced metaphor describing something in the real world) and anagogical (as an allegory describing the afterlife). And

this is where the Dutch Golden Age landscape painting and the tradition of topographic verse converge: They both describe the local reality, and this is done in part for the sheer joy of it, and in part to open up reflections on the larger questions of life and the afterlife as they unfold in the specific place represented.

The reality of what is described in topographic verse plays an important role, as it situates the description in this world, and thus transforms the question of Biblical interpretation into a question of interpreting the place of the depicted topography within the same biblical tradition. And as such, it is easy to understand why descriptions of topography and descriptions of human praxis go hand in hand in this literary tradition, for these two things have not been separated yet. In the same way as the Dutch paintings are filled with people and buildings, so too are topographic verses. The people go about their business, in their unreflecting everyday way, and it is the role of the poet to open up the dimensions of this reality toward other levels of existence. For this, the inclusion of other dimensions of existence is the understanding of place and space as inherited from medieval times, and possibly even earlier.

As we will see in a later section, *Jimmen* is a prime example of the coexistence of levels: The depiction of Jimmen and his owner's work is realistic, but the owner's transformation into a horse at the end must be read allegorically. In the same vein, the title poem "Solaris Corrected" ends with the subject of the poem leaving his body, in true anagogical fashion.

### SOLARIS CORRECTED

The title poem in *Solaris Corrected* is set almost 500 years into the future. The text is written in a Stavanger dialect which has been heavily modified to imply the intermediate language history. My ad hoc translation into English will hide all of this, so even if you need to read the following translation to understand the content, I hope you will also take a look at the original text as it is quoted first. Here is the opening of the poem, addressing the reader in a fashion resembling poetry predating Romanticism:

Wat vul aig bli  
om du ku kreip fra  
din world til uss?  
SKEIMFULL, aig trur, ven  
du kommen vid diner imago  
ovfr oren tiim, tecn, airlife,





Rimbereid is following the guidelines for public speech according to classic rhetorics here. This is the *exordium*, the opening of the speech, where the speaker addresses the audience to show his *ethos* and win their attention and trust (*captatio benevolentiae*).

What we read is a version of Stavanger dialect filled with influences from other languages around the North Sea basin. These influences are not limited to loanwords, or even code switching to another language for words that already have a counterpart in Norwegian, but include changed grammar, like aspects of English syntax and the use of the French “NE” to mark negation, along with phonetic changes like English diphthongs in words like “aig” and “skeimfull” (“eg” and “skamfull” in Stavanger dialect).

As the offshore oil industry plays such a dominant part in present-day Stavanger, these language changes function as an implication that this activity—which crosses territorial lines between Britain, Germany and Norway—has become the one overpowering cultural feature in Stavanger. There is also a clear connection between this identification of offshore activity as the main cultural influence, and the fact that the persona in “Solaris Corrected” carries out his work on the bed of the ocean: This is the most obvious way in which Rimbereid’s poem represents an extrapolation of the Stavanger we know today. But in addition to this, Rimbereid’s language of the future shares characteristics with the language of the literature predating Romanticism. Written language in these earlier days was filled with foreign words and phrases, and with inconsistent spelling.<sup>2</sup> It is with the National Romantic project that the written language first reaches its stability, with consequent spelling based on etymological studies and domestic spelling of loanwords. This point is further underscored paratextually, as the book is equipped with Jacob Ziegler’s primitive, premodern map of Scandinavia from 1532 on the dust jacket and on the last two pages.

But these acknowledgments of relation to the old tradition of topographic verse give important information to the reader, because “Solaris Corrected” is not a pastiche: We are presented with the Stavanger region of the future through the temperament, reflections and everyday life of a person who is staged in a dramatic monologue or persona poem. As we see in the opening of the poem quoted above, this person is equipped with the kind of imagination and sensitivity we might identify as the modern subjectivity only found in literature written from the Romantic era onward. This is remarked upon later in the poem, when a medical examination concludes that the persona has “noko for staerk production/of egne picts” (“a slightly too high production/of his own images”) (Rimbereid 2004, 41; Trans. HOA). This leads to the following exclamation on his part, regarding his wife who is a photographer:

WAT vul da Shiris breyn vera?  
 WAT nevrons exist flammande i henna?  
 WAT konklusion vul innsirkla henna? (Rimbereid 2004, 41)

WHAT would then Shiri's brain be?  
 WHAT neurons exist flaming in her?  
 WHAT conclusion would encircle her? (Trans. HOA)

If his imagination is diagnosed as a slight illness, then her “konklusion,” her diagnosis, would obviously be that of a severe mental illness. This means that the society described is one where the Romantic or (post) modernist poetic imagination has completely fallen out of favor. What we see is thus that this future society represents a return to the understanding of art predating Romanticism—art as *techne*, as handicraft without the modern concept of creativity.

At this point it should be noted that there are references in the poem to tourists coming to Norway to experience the beauty of nature. This means therefore people who are still living inside the Romantic and modern paradigm of landscape. As a photographer, Shiri is also somehow related to an aesthetic experience of the world. But the persona speaking in “Solaris Corrected” is not. His declaration of being “SKEIMFUL,” ashamed, of his time is something he “thinks” he would be. And the rest of the poem focuses on his thoughts and deliberations on his life and his world. This is not an expression of feeling, it is—in the same way as the topographic literary tradition—the use of landscape as a starting point and a continued source of input for an extensive reflection on the state of the surrounding world.

Instead of one world, with one view of the world, we are presented with a specific view, associated closely with the society in question, namely “Organic 14.6.” The specificity of this—that his girlfriend is not like everyone else, that he is a little bit different from the norm, and that there are other societies where the view of the world is qualitatively different, sits well with the rhetoric tradition: as behavior and society is shaped through *praxis*, these are not universally uniform. This is the big difference between the rhetoric tradition and the idealistic, philosophical tradition from Plato onward. And so the persona in “Solaris Corrected” is not the voice of everyone at his time in the future, but the voice of a specific person in a specific place. He is a rhetoric *exemplum* of his time, not a statistical everyone as we find them in modern statistics.

But he is an *exemplum* of a collective we, of people from Stavanger, probably of people from Norway, possibly even for people in the Western world (as the tourists are predominantly Russian and Chinese) in the future. He, the persona, is speaking on behalf of a culture when he suggests that his girlfriend would be diagnosed as mentally ill, in a poem dominated by the reflecting form since before Romanticism.

The thought this leaves us with is compelling: If creativity is presented as something of an illness in the future, does this mean that the age of creative imagination is merely an interregnum in our history? If the language of the future is described as destabilized in the same way as it once was, does this mean that we live with a blindness toward a fundamental instability within our systems of information and knowledge? In other words: Is the stability of the world we believe we are surrounded by a mere illusion, something that will inevitably fall back into what we regard as a chaotic and primitive life where we have no control? The scope of this article does not allow for further discussion of these questions, even if they are well worth a thought. But the obvious and short answer is that Rimbereid's poem indeed points toward an inherent destabilization within communication and culture itself.

### LIFE AS WORK

Interesting, from our point of view, is what Audun Lindholm, editor of the highly influential periodical *Vagant*, suggests with reference to the title *Solaris Corrected*: that Rimbereid's correction of Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris* (1961), and Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 movie loosely based on this, lies in Rimbereid's dismissal of the concept of travel in his vision of the future: "Rimbereid's book might (bearing the title in mind) be read as a comment on both Lem and Tarkovsky, and the correction seems to lie especially in the insistence on man being earthbound." ("Rimbereid's bok kan (med tittelen in mente) leses som en kommentar til både Lem og Tarkovskij, og korreksjonen synes særlig å ligge i insisteringen på menneskets jordbundethet") (Lindholm 2008; Trans. HOA).<sup>3</sup>

Let us have another look at the sequence describing work in Stavanger in the future: "WHERE/I live, in 14.6, we work/only with our nano-fingers,/they are our total knowledge, we work/so little, 30 minutes a day. I look at/my fingers, part of organic 14.6." Nano-fingers are robotic arms, used to perform work on the atomic and molecular level. Later, we learn that he works with robots that perform work at the bottom of the

ocean. Hence, the nano-fingers are placed on the robots. He looks at his fingers, which are “part of organic 14.6” in the same way as the robotic fingers are part of him. (A Norwegian reader will associate “14.6” with the way the ocean on the Norwegian continental shelf is divided into “blocks” for commercial activity, that is the oil industry.<sup>4</sup>)

The above quotation is thought-provoking because there is a double relation in this passage, between robot and man on the one side and man and a place where several people live called “organic” on the other. And because this strikes a chord with what Aristotle writes about slavery. For Aristotle, as he writes in *Politics*, a slave is not defined as someone you own, but as someone who, like tools, is part of the master. As Giorgio Agamben explains in *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2 (2016, 13), after having referred to this passage in Aristotle: “The slave is a part (of the body) of the master, in the ‘organic’ and not simply instrumental sense of the term, to such an extent that Aristotle can speak of a ‘community of life’ between slave and master.”

Why does an educated writer like Rimbereid place “live” and “work” next to each other? What does he mean by stating that the nano-fingers are “our total knowledge”? Why is the worker “part of” society? And why is this society called “organic,” the word Aristotle uses to explain how the slave is a part of the master’s body?

This clustering of concepts goes to the core of understanding human beings as identical to their relationship with their surroundings through work. The persona presents himself as identified with a place where all they know is how to operate nano-fingers (as present-day Stavanger only knows how to pump up oil). He is made who he is by being a part of this society. As part of an “organic” master-slave relation, he is not his own, but as much an inseparable, unautonomous part of his place of work as the robots.

Note that “robot” is a word derived from Czech “robota,” “serf-labor.” The persona in “Solaris Corrected” only operates the fingers on these serfs, these robots, for half an hour a day, but this is still what he himself regards as the all-important aspect of his existence. At the end of the poem, his physical presence is relinquished, as he is—probably—transported through an elevator down to an empty oil reservoir at the bottom of the North Sea and transferred into an “abstract-faktical” duplication of himself (Rimbereid 2004, 39–40). Maybe because his work is not needed anymore, but explicitly because he has been told that this is humanity’s last hope for survival after the planet has been made uninhabitable by human activity.

As the concept of humans changing shape because robots take over their jobs is also present at the conclusion of the other object of our investigations, *Jimmen*, there is good reason to believe that this is Rimbereid's suggestion or question: If humans are defined by their work, and by their partaking in "organic" work societies, then perhaps there is no defining aspect, nothing to make them human, after work is gone. At least humans would have to be defined in a different way, as yet unknown to us.

The persona in "Solaris Corrected" reflects on this:

DET seis i Bibl at  
 "love stand ovfr all ting."  
 MEN stand du onli i love,  
 haf ne andre gifts, hendels, arbeid  
 du da risk  
                   standa og standa og standa. (Rimbereid 2004, 34–5)

IT says in the Bible that  
 "love stands above everything."  
 BUT if you only stand in love,  
 have no other gifts, happenings, work  
 you then risk  
                   standing and standing and standing. (Trans. HOA)

As we have seen earlier, the reference in the opening of the poem goes to what Aristotle writes on slaves. According to Agamben, the concept of "labor" as something one can buy and sell is introduced in Roman times. The Greeks only trade in the result, in the product. But their slavery, their "organic" view of the master-slave relationship stands at the beginning, as the starting point for this definition of man through work. So the reference in "Solaris Corrected" connects the end of work with the beginning of work, in a way similar to the way language was reflected upon: What we see as part of the stability of our world is again presented in a way that both describes its future ending and points toward its beginning, which again means that our world—indeed, our own personality, our humanity—does not have the kind of eternal permanence both we and our philosophical tradition take for granted.

The biblical allusion goes to 1 Corinthians 13. This famous passage lists skills and knowledges, and disregards them all in relation to *agape* (in modern translations, *agape* is changed to "love," so Paul's insistence on the supremacy of the reciprocal love between man and God is obscured). We

note that the persona in “Solaris Corrected” turns Paul’s disregard for praxis around 180 degrees: he asks what love/*agape* is if you have no earthly skills. The anagogical level of “Solaris Corrected” is thus presented in the negative, as something pointed at but placed as a poignant absence within the world as it is unfolded in the text.

And by this, we are back at present-day Stavanger, a town defined by the oil industry, with people defined by the oil industry, speaking a language defined by the oil industry. Historical occurrences shape the world, and the world shapes us, to a point where the lack of presence of an afterlife in the secularized society must be addressed if the text is to live up to its ambition of being topographic verse, with an anagogical level in place.

But tradition shapes us, too. And here is another possible reason for the title: Stanislaw Lem published the novel *Solaris* in 1961. Jean-Michel Jasiensko published the French translation of *Solaris* in 1964. Boris Niremburg directed the movie *Solaris* in 1968. Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox published the English translation of *Solaris* in 1970. Andrei Tarkovsky directed the movie *Solaris* in 1972. Steven Soderbergh directed the movie *Solaris* in 2002. Lem has expressed disappointment, to say the least, with the movies as well as with the English translation. This only highlights the fact that all these versions make for destabilization. Like all the versions of the same story you might find in literature before the modern concept of creativity is established—with Shakespeare at the center of the Western canon, although only a handful of his plays have an entirely original plot (Mabillard 2000)—*Solaris* drifts around in our culture as something that has taken shape after numerous times and places.

In Tarkovsky’s version, human scientists look down in the ocean and see their own metaphysical aspirations mirrored. In Rimberid’s “corrected” version, the people of Stavanger look down in the ocean and see their aspirations mirrored as oil work. Even transcendence is to be obtained down there, in empty oil and gas reservoirs. But this eternal existence after leaving the body behind, in the computer-generated reality under the sea bed, is just another aspect of the anagogical level the “Solaris Corrected” persona sees no point in. He reflects on this, and comes to the conclusion that the only thing one could do would be to talk to other people. And that is, to him, like when love is just to be “standing and standing and standing.” An afterlife without *praxis*; without the physical weight of work, is of no interest to him.

## JIMMEN

Turning now to the book depicting Stavanger's past, we will be able to follow a path ending up in a position neatly mirroring that of the future in "Solaris Corrected": *Jimmen* takes its name from a horse. Together with his owner, he walks the streets of mid-1970s Stavanger, collecting food waste used for pig fodder. Once a week, they empty latrine buckets in those backyards where there are still outhouses. Throughout the poem, the owner and the horse take turns as speaking persona. But even if the owner occasionally expresses himself as if he spoke directly to the horse, there is no indication that they can understand each other. So this is not a dialogue, but rather two dramatic, internal monologues intertwined.

The owner's language is traditional Stavanger dialect, while the horse's language might best be described as Old Norse, with simplified syntactic structure and some rather obvious limitations to his vocabulary. As modern Stavanger dialect—like all language in Norway, in Iceland and the Faroe Islands—descends directly from Old Norse, the impression is that the horse's language is an archaic form of human speech:

Høyre eg no  
gode herren  
koma nedåt sti  
og burtåt stallen mine heimars.  
Han mun opna veggar tvo  
og ljøset skal då rida stort  
med taumar gull  
og munnbet silver. (Rimbereid 2011, 7)

Hear I know  
the good master  
come down the path  
and to stable mine home's.  
He may open walls two  
and the light will then ride large  
with reins gold  
and mouthpiece silver. (Trans. HOA)

The age of horses lasted longer in Norway than most places in Northern Europe. Due to trade restrictions, one needed an import license to buy a car until 1960, and private cars did not become commonplace until a

decade later. In 1970, only 70,000 of the 300,000 farms in Norway had a tractor. As the 1970s progressed, motorized vehicles rapidly became all-dominant. One could still see the occasional horse and carriage even in relatively big towns like Stavanger, but by 1975 this would be very rare, and almost have the same function of civilizatoric embarrassment as the aforementioned outhouses.

As man and horse in the time of cars, Jimmen and his owner are living anachronisms. This is underlined when they view the first condeep platform being towed out of Stavanger on its way to the Norwegian oil fields in the North Sea (this happened in 1975). The horse of old times is contrasted with the production of fuel for cars in present age.

Rimbereid makes use of the parallel between the towing boats and the horse in front of the carriage. This is further expanded when Jimmen tries to tow a car with engine trouble, but fails because he is old. The age of the horse is coming to an end, both literally and allegorically.

There are also references to the owner's sister. In a "muttering" way, as if all readers were intimate with the Stavanger region, it is mentioned that she lives at Dale, but not that Dale is a huge mental hospital. She is religious, knitting for the church bazaar, which means that she is a member of a Free Church congregation. This makes her a form of living anachronism as well. From the 1930s onward, Stavanger was a town with a lot of activity of this kind. But by the 1970s, the active members were senior citizens, typically old ladies, and today most if not all of these religious societies are gone.

As in "Solaris Corrected," we are introduced to the society through personas who are not describing the topography in the catalogue fashion of the old topographic verse, but rather through monologues which make us see the world from their perspective, not expressively as is the norm from Romanticism onward, but through their observations and their accompanying reflections on them.

The choice of time frame, the dawn of the oil industry in the Stavanger region, is of course no coincidence. By choosing the horse and his owner as the basis for a description of the rapid introduction of a new era in the up to this point rather backward Stavanger region, the poem succeeds in following up on one of the main traits of the old topographic literature: to describe a society as it is changing, and to make both old and new and the contrast between them clear to see.



The world's first industrial robot was introduced by the Norwegian company Trallfa in 1961. Commercial production followed in 1969, and was moved into a new facility outside Stavanger in 1975—the same year Jimmen and his master observe the first condeep platform. At the end of the poem, Jimmen's owner seeks out this new factory. When he comes out again, Jimmen is nowhere to be seen, and the owner's language goes through gradual changes until he speaks like Jimmen has done earlier.

Jimmen has been overtaken by cars. Now his owner is being overtaken by robots. And the untimeliness of his existence is demonstrated through a fall out of the language of the contemporary and into the archaic language of the horse, and of a society long gone. At the same time, there is immense urgency here. Jimmen and the owner are not only confronted with a change, but with a civilizatoric jump from religion and horses to oil and cybernetics.

The mirroring effect of the endings of "Solaris Corrected" and *Jimmen* are striking. We were presented with a man disappearing at the end of the oil age. Now we are introduced to a man who disappears at the start of the same era. In sum, these two poems constitute a beginning and an end to what is today the identity of Stavanger and of Stavanger people, namely the oil industry and the work related to it.

The connection between the two is further underlined in a sequence in *Jimmen* where the horse contemplates the reins with which the owner controls him, and wonders if his master is controlled by invisible reins from the people in the houses where they collect garbage. As we understand, this touches upon the same question of work and identity, of "organic" relations as I discussed in relation to "Solaris Corrected."

In sum, the old horse in the last days of the horse in Stavanger, together with his master in the last days of this kind of work, points not only to a personal disappearance, but to a disappearance on a larger scale: The horse and the man collecting biowaste is not only an *image* which has disappeared from Stavanger. It is something which has stopped taking place in Stavanger. In the same vein, the man of the future disappearing into a computer-generated reality is representative of a culture which stops taking space. This disappearance into the future resembles *virtual reality*, but in a radicalized form, where there is no outside, no "world of bricks and mortars" anymore.

## STAVANGER, PRE- AND POSTMODERN

Were we ever modern? When reading really old texts, we are often struck by the way science is mixed up with other sectors of human intellectual activity. But we have greater difficulties in identifying this blurring of the border of objective knowledge when dealing with our own time. Most obviously, we will find the understanding of the human psyche frighteningly primitive, even as recently as with Freudian psychoanalysis and the practice of lobotomy. And if lobotomy has been replaced by electroshock treatment, we still do not know exactly how to do this or why it works.

Even in the hardest of sciences, like physics, the element of insecurity is staggering. We expect dark matter, but we cannot be surer of the existence of this *terra incognita* than we once were of a large inhabitable continent south of Australia.

To a person who has lived through the 1980s, with its postmodern skepticism toward the ideology of progress, the pit to fall into as a consequence of this understanding is that of new age nonsense and alternative medicine. The cynical, thoughtful way of looking at it is to reflect on the relativity of knowledge and systems of information as an integral part of our existence.

By pouring present-day Stavanger into the old tradition of topographic verse, in ways which make the presence of the latter clear to see, Øyvind Rimbereid makes us see how a specific position in time and space affects us, and how we in turn affect not only the view of this space, but indeed the way this space unfolds, the way this space comes to function as an objective environment for other people and, indeed, for entire cultures.

Stavanger in the past of *Jimmen*, in the present of *Late Topographies*, and in the future of "Solaris Corrected" is a continuum of human *praxis* which is specific to this place, but has its roots in traditions leading all the way back to the origin of our civilization. The depiction of our civilization may in certain aspects lean rather heavily on metaphysical beliefs, but even these are rooted in space, in time and in tradition, for Rimbereid has not invented the questions posed by the personas in his poems. He has merely relocated them, to his own specific place. And pointed toward a future where it will come to an end, where we leave "organic" work relationships and, thus, leave the physical space we have been filling through our *praxis*.

## NOTES

1. Of the new wave of poetry written in Norwegian dialect, Erlend O. Nødtvedt's *Bergens beskrivelse* (2011; "Depiction of Bergen") is of special relevance, as it is structured as the same kind of dialogue with a tradition predating Romanticism that Rimbereid, as we will see in this chapter, makes use of a decade earlier.
2. Norway was part of the twin kingdom Denmark-Norway from 1536 to 1814. A purist wish to abolish the huge number of borrowed words, or at least give them domestic spelling, was introduced in Denmark-Norway in the middle of the eighteenth century (Spurkland 1987, 60). Danish was introduced as a separate subject in schools in 1775. Ole Malling published *Store og gode Handlinger af Danske, Norske og Holstenere* (1877; "Great deeds by Danes, Norwegians and Holstenians"). And, as a language history reads: "Myndighetene gjorde stavemåten i den til gjeldende norm, og med et hadde dansk fått en offisiell rettskriving" ("The authorities made the spelling in that book normative, and on account of that, Danish had an official spelling") (Spurkland 1987, 61).
3. "Solaris Corrected" has been commented upon in passing in many articles on contemporary Norwegian and Scandinavian poetry. In addition to this, Lindholm's and four other articles focus solely on "Solaris Corrected." None of these five articles has been published in scientific, peer-reviewed publications.
4. In the most comprehensive systematization of ancient sources, Matthew Dillon and Lydia Garland's *Ancient Greece: Social and Historical Documents from Archaic Times to the Death of Socrates* (2nd ed. 2000), we find a paragraph corresponding to section 14.6, namely "14.6 Aristotle on the Writing of History." I quote: "It is also clear from what we have said that the work of a poet is not to tell what has happened, but what might or could happen either probably or inevitably. (...) For this reason poetry is more scientific and serious than history, for poetry speaks general truths, and history particular facts. By general truths I mean the sorts of things that a certain type of person will say or do either probably or inevitably (...)" (Dillon and Garland 2000 [1997], 509). If this is not a mere coincidence, it means that Rimbereid is situating his character not only geographically but also within canonic, classical thinking on literature and history.

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