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“An unbearable smell”. This is the most common description of a visit to a whaling station in French accounts of travels to Norway at the turn of the twentieth century. This repetition of the trope was no accident: these travel accounts were marked by a strong intertextuality, or to put it more bluntly, by abundant plagiarism. Xavier Marmier, often the plagiarised one, complained that “Every summer, curious people embark for the North Cape and describe afterwards in big volumes, with the help of easy plagiarisms, the regions they have travelled through in a few days as the bird flies”.¹ This strong intertextuality means that all these tourists knew beforehand that the smell was going to be unbearable. This chapter questions the reasons that made them put themselves in situations they knew would disgust them.

As the title signals, I will argue that these French travellers experienced a fascinated disgust: even though they were thoroughly disgusted, they were sufficiently fascinated by the whales to keep on visiting whale foundries. It was not exceptional to be intrigued by whales and their bodies. Environmental humanities scholar Jamie L. Jones shows the success of the “Prince of Whales”, a dead whale transported on a train and exhibited in several cities in the USA in 1881–1882.² Yet the situation analysed in this chapter differs from that of the “Prince of Whales” in that the whales did not come to these French tourists; rather, it was the tourists who travelled to them. This chapter is therefore concerned with the history of travel and tourism, with “Nordic Travels” in the sense of travels to a particular part of the Nordic region,
Northern Norway. It also leans on the existing historiography of senses and emotions: these tourists experienced whale bodies through their senses, especially smell. This experience made them feel disgust, which, following William Ian Miller, is apprehended here as an emotion, and therefore distinguished from a physical nausea.³

The chapter starts with a presentation of the main traits of French tourism to Northern Norway in the nineteenth century. I will then look at the disgust expressed in travel accounts, seeking to explain its various forms. I then proceed to analyse the fascination of which these repeated visits are illustrative, before presenting the tourists’ disappointment when confronted with the technologies of modern whaling.

The travellers: French tourists in Northern Norway and their writings

The French tourists in question were mostly upper-class people. An 1896 cruise to the North Cape cost for instance 1200 francs per passenger – almost the entire yearly salary of a worker.⁴ This cruise was arranged by the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, which was French, but many other French tourists travelled on German ships and the itineraries were the same, including visits to whaling stations. The experience of the French tourists was therefore not very different from that of the tourists of other nationalities. But the tourists’ emotional experience, which this discussion aims to understand, is inaccessible for most of them, for lack of sources. The possible analysis is limited to those who wrote and published travel accounts. As already indicated, these were marked by a strong intertextuality: they read and copied each other. This intertextuality was largely limited to French texts. The only foreign text regularly mentioned was the Baedeker guide, which was originally in German but was also found in French translations that proved very successful.

Many French people had a special relationship to whaling: it was often celebrated as having French roots in the medieval Basque whalers, but French whaling had gradually
declined and the last French whaling ships stopped their activity in 1868. French whalers are presented as incompetent in Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* (1851), but they were not the only ones to have productivity issues: the effectiveness of whaling improved just as French people stopped practicing it, thanks in good part to Svend Foyn’s inventions that made it possible to hunt more whale species. A shipowner from south-eastern Norway, Foyn built his fortune on the application of steam engines to whaling and on the use of harpoon cannons and explosive harpoons. There were several attempts afterwards to revitalize French whaling by adopting these modern methods, but to no avail. For most of the tourists studied here, French whaling was therefore non-existent at the time of their travel to Norway, while in its modernised version whaling was associated with Norway.

It must be noted that whaling was never the main Norwegian attraction for these French travellers: as the titles of the published travel accounts show, they wanted above all to see the midnight sun, the North Cape, and sometimes Lapland. Even the fjords are less frequently mentioned in the titles. The number of French travellers to Norway increased after 1880, and this made their travels concomitant with the development of modern whaling in northern Norway. Not all these travellers went so far north, however, many stopped in Trondheim. Those who went as far north as the North Cape published proportionally more travel accounts and are hence overrepresented in the sources. Publication of these books peaked around 1900. This chapter is based on twenty books that discuss whales in passages of very variable lengths, published for the most part between the late 1880s and the early 1900s. While only three of these books were written by women, there were many women on these cruises: their experience is therefore even less easily accessible to the historian than that of their male co-travellers. Most of these books, though not all, had a very small distribution. Accordingly, they are used here collectively as documentary evidence of visits to Norway.
consider them as products of a broader discourse, rather than as individual texts that influenced readers and other writers.

That many of these descriptions are very similar is not only due to plagiarism: the bulk of these tourists visited the same place, a foundry in Nord-Troms, on the island Store Skorøya/Skåro (often called Skaro in the French sources).

Established in 1887, this factory had two whaling ships and was chosen by Wilhelm II in 1891 when he wanted to hunt a whale. The foundry then specialized partly in welcoming tourists, and about 2 000 people signed it guest book. It was heavily decorated with whale bones, included a whaling museum, and one could buy photographs of the station, or small whale pieces or bones as souvenirs. Store Skorøya made its entry into the Baedeker guide on Norway, Sweden and Denmark in the 1890s. The Baedeker explained that the tourist ships stopped there only if their captain had heard in Tromsø that a whale had been captured. This indicates that, in spite of the presence of the small whaling museum on the island, the visit was about the whale bodies themselves, and not only the skeletons. The Baedeker further prepared the tourists’ experience by indicating that the smell would reach them from afar, and that they would notice greasy pieces of whales floating on the water before they reached the island, on which the ground was also very greasy. This description promised therefore awful smell and greasy water and ground, preparing the tourists for the disgust they would feel. Yet
the whale bodies were not only repulsive: the guide announced the possibility of buying souvenirs on the island, such as whale ears or fins.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, in the USA people attempted to steal pieces of the “Prince of Whales”, as Jamie Jones explains.\textsuperscript{14} Whale bodies were therefore also something one might want to own a piece of, despite the disgust they inspired. While passengers had no say in whether the ship would stop in Skårøy or not, disembarking and visiting the whaling station was voluntary: it is remarkable that so many did, despite their disgust.

The disgust: Topoi of the accounts of whaling

The smell of the whales was the object of the strongest descriptions. This was also the case in earlier texts, for example a book on whaling published in 1861.\textsuperscript{15} Yet the tourists mobilized other senses too when describing whales. Sight was used for instance: visual descriptions are abundant in these texts, and these authors and their publishers often saw whaling as sufficiently exotic to include illustrations of whale flensing – often engravings, sometimes photographs – in the books. They were often not provided by the traveller himself, or herself, but copied or reused from other publications.

\textit{Fig. 3. Mgr Fallize, Promenades en Norvège, 1903, p. 197.}

Smell remained however what they insisted the most upon, and what mobilised techniques to continue the tour: they were warned to hold handkerchiefs imbibed with cologne in front of their noses.\textsuperscript{16} Some tried to smoke to cover the smell. For these authors, almost all men, it was also an occasion to show their hardness in comparison to women: several mentioned that women of their group vomited or fainted. Few admitted that the men also succumbed to this “irresistible nausea”.\textsuperscript{17}

These travellers did not imagine the stink of butchered whales, of course: it was there. As Bathsheba Demuth reminds us, American whalers working in the Pacific tolerated it only
for the pay. Likewise, in Northern Norway, newspapers complained in 1873 that the local cities did not benefit enough from whaling while they suffered the inconveniences: pieces of whales floating in the harbour or decomposing on the shore, while all the stairs became slippery because of the oil. Yet the workers on Skårøy tolerated this smell. The collectiveness of the tourists’ reaction of disgust is interesting. It was prepared, of course, by the reading of the Baedeker and of preceding travel accounts, but I wish to argue that there were two other reasons for this reaction. A first reason is the general evolution of the sensitivity to smells since the eighteenth century, analysed by Alain Corbin. He argues that the elites progressively rejected “heavy” smells and avoided contact with the “smelly” poor to find refuge on the mountains; the floral smells were especially favoured. One of these travel accounts describes literally this strategy: the author flees from the boiler with a woman and they find refuge a bit higher on the island, in a garden where they smell the flowers. People were conscious that the sensitivity to smells changes on the individual level, with exposition to strong odours. Manual workers, often more exposed, were considered less sensitive than those who were usually shielded from such stinks. This is what happened on this island: the workers were more used to the smell than the tourists – or, at least, the tourists saw themselves as more sensitive, and hence had to insist on it in their writings. The sense of smell was here used as an instrument of social distinction.

Another reason that explains the intensity of the disgust of these travellers in the whaling stations is also related to their sociology. As the travellers were rich, urban people mostly coming from France’s big cities, they were far less exposed than other French people to the butchering of animals and to violence against animals in general. As a result, they were more sensitive to this kind of violence than, for instance, French peasants or workers. Like the sensitivity to odours, this sensitivity to violence against animals had grown since the eighteenth century, and especially in the period following the French Revolution. As Éric
Baratay points out, it was an aspect of the model of the “sensitive man” that many philosophers and politicians wanted to promote during the Revolution. This trend extended to butchery animals: while until the Revolution it was common for butchers to use the street as an extension of their shop and kill animals there before taking them inside to butcher them, in 1809 Napoléon decided that Paris was to have dedicated abattoirs, places where the animals were killed. These laws were broadened afterwards: in 1850, all violence against domestic animals in public became forbidden. As Maurice Agulhon and Alain Corbin explain, the point of these laws was not only to protect the animals, but also to avoid letting the common people rejoice in blood spectacles that were considered to incite them to violence. Agulhon argues further that it was an attempt at regulating rural practices by city bourgeois who did not have to get used to the violence because someone else did it for them, out of their sight. Most tourists who published travel accounts fit with this idea of urban people less tolerant to violence. Mostly more sensitive to odours and to violence against animals than the local inhabitants, these tourists were especially prone to be disgusted by the flensing scenes they saw on Skårøy. Yet they were also fascinated, and this fascination kept them visiting the island.

The fascination

All authors underline the popularity of these excursions, and the intensity of their descriptions shows the strength of the fascination they experienced together with the disgust. This fascination was twofold: while it was partly a fascination with being disgusted, it was also a fascination with the whales. The relationship of these city bourgeois to what disgusted and/or frightened them was not only one of rejection: they were also attracted by what they found disgusting. As Théophile Caradec overtly explained in 1900, “The day before, one of our travel companions had […] visited this whale hunting station. The account he had given us of
his day was imprinted with such horror that no more was needed to convince the undecided or
the lazy to accompany us? In this sense, the tourists’ visits to whaling stations which they
knew in advance would disgust them are comparable to other touristic practices of the time
such as “fashionable slumming”, more or less organised tours of the popular and often
perceived as crime-ridden city districts. Fashionable slumming, like the visits to whaling
stations, implied travelling outside of one’s milieu or country, or both: the displacement
reinforced the experience. It was all the strongest in this case that the stop in Skårøy took
place close to most of these cruises’ destination, the North Cape, and therefore almost at the
peak of exoticism in these tourists’ journey. This exoticism was all the strongest that, as I
mentioned, French whaling had completely disappeared by that time. Moreover, the whales
fascinated these tourists: their sheer size is enough to impress anyone. In this sense, visiting
the whaling stations was a way to see them better than at sea. Springer explains that a dead
whale was even used as a sort of dock for tourists to walk ashore. Illustrations like this one,
with a crowd of people serving as a scale indication, were typical of the perceived
insufficiency of language to convey the effect that their size had on the travellers.

Fig. 4. Léon Dumuys, Voyage au pays des fiords, 1892, p. 77.

In earlier periods, the size of the whales made them seem like monstrous creatures.
This was still the case earlier in the nineteenth century: Xavier Marmier, who travelled to
Northern Norway and Spitsbergen in the late 1830s, described a whale with a “monstrous
head”. Léonie d’Aunet, who was on the same expedition, described a place where whale
bones were stored as the kitchen of an ogre. This discourse on the whales as monsters did
not disappear, but was progressively accompanied then overtaken by a discourse on the
whales as beautiful animals. They were perceived as such when they were in the sea: in
another early travel account, published in 1857, Louis Enault gives an enthusiastic description
of a group of whales playing in the water. “When eight or ten whales at once surround the
ship and throw off their shining waterspouts, you feel like in the middle of a garden at some royal park”. Enault travelled before the modernisation of whaling from the late 1860s revived it. This made his voyage richer in whale encounters than those of the many tourists who followed in the 1890s and 1900s, when whales were hunted more intensely. Many of them described similar scenes, but with fewer and fewer whales as time passed. Jules Leclercq was an especially good witness of this evolution because he travelled twice in the region: in the early 1870s, and in the early 1900s. He noted that there were fewer whales the second time. He reported the complaints of the participants on his cruise that there was no living whale in sight in Finnmark: seeing whales was something they expected during a trip to Norway. When they finally saw a group of whales, it was not in Norway but further north, close to Bjørnøya. The whales were now seen with empathy, and Leclercq wrote a poem to a whale he saw being flensed on Skårøy:

«Oh! Deplorable fate of the one who was queen

Of the seas, the Ocean, her immense domain,

Which of the ancient Flood was contemporaneous

And of our fauna is still suzerain."

This growing empathy for the whales, accompanied by the fact that many of these tourists now only saw dead whales being butchered rather than living ones playing in the waves, was a source of disappointment for them: what was blamed was the modernisation of whaling.

The disappointment: new whaling techniques and the threat of extinction

Tourists were willing to see dead whale bodies, and they were thrilled when they saw whales in the water. Whether they enjoyed seeing the hunt itself and the transition from living to dead

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whale is more doubtful. Only one travel account, written by Charles Rabot, overtly recommended in 1898 that all tourists participate in a whale hunt. Rabot was not a typical tourist, he had scientific pretensions in opposition to the other authors of these travel accounts, he presented himself as a glaciologist. He was also particularly sympathetic to the Norwegians and spoke their language, a rarity among the French travellers. Yet the other books had a similar effect: the disgusted descriptions of whale bodies were enough that people kept visiting Skårøy. Whale hunting was also often an aspect of the advertisement of these cruises. A cruise organised for instance in 1906 by the Revue Générale des sciences employed up to 50 Norwegian whalers to let the participants see a hunt. The whole cruise was especially marketed for hunters and it also included fox hunting, reindeer hunting etc. For Rabot and the promoters of this hunting cruise, whaling was attractive because it was the struggle of man against “nature’s giant”: in the case of the cruise, it was explicitly presented as sport. As Sylvain Venayre emphasizes, hunting as sport was a quest for strong emotions in the nineteenth century and the bigger and more dangerous the hunted animals were, the stronger the emotions for the hunter. Whales were therefore especially well-suited to this imaginary, but not without conditions. Eric Baratay points out that animal suffering was not ignored by the promoters of this sort of hunting, although they minimized this suffering by either presenting the animals as dangerous brutes, or by presenting them as valorous fighters. Hunting differed from slaughter only if the fight was fair.

This is where the other French travellers to the region disagreed profoundly around 1900: for them, there was nothing noble anymore in hunting whales, and even less in conjunction with a tourist cruise. Different groups opposed these practices. For the richer hunters, often aristocrats, who had the money to go to the polar regions on their own ship and not on a cruise, such a “hunting cruise” was nonsense because there were far too many people on them, hunting as sport was considered a more individual experience. For the great
majority of the tourists whose writings are analysed here, this discourse on heroic whalers was problematic because, on reaching Skårøy, they were faced with the fact that it was obsolete. Modern whaling techniques, including harpoon cannons, and explosive harpoons, interested and impressed them. This equipment was demonstrated to them on Skårøy, and most books include presentations of it. However, these techniques took away what the tourists were looking for: a sense of adventure, of danger. For Sanrefus in 1900, “Only a few years ago, this fishing was a veritable struggle, a fair duel between man and animal”, but no longer. As Deschamps put it in 1898, “the whale, which cannot fight anymore, will disappear from the seas, killed by the cannon like a simple human”. No longer a monster, the whale was made comparable to humans in its helplessness against modern weapons; it was now a relatable animal for which the tourists showed empathy.

As late as in the first decade of the twentieth century, when they were almost forty years old, these technical changes were described as new or recent. This shows that, in spite of the circulation of information, the tourists’ notion of whaling was still that of the romantic age: they were not expecting an industrial hunt, their horizon of expectation was therefore obsolete. That industrial whaling shocked French tourists at the turn of the twentieth century also highlights the alignment of several chronologies. This was the moment when French tourists began to visit Norway in the thousands. As Eric Baratay shows, this was also the moment when the sensitivity to violence against animals went from an individual phenomenon to a collective one, not limited to preservationists. For many earlier authors, the disgust was centred on the whales themselves, which were presented as monstrous. Conversely, this generation of tourists presented what was done to the whales as disgusting; the sight and smell of their bodies were proofs of the massacre. This meant that the whalers were not admired very much: they were now seen as meritless killers instead of heroic hunters. For Sallès in 1898, “the more civilized man becomes, the less brave he becomes”. 

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The employees of the whaling stations were even less considered than those on the ships. The visits to Skårøy often included a dinner with the director of the factory: Sallès describes a gloomy scene, in which the toasts of the ship captain for the factory director fell flat and were not followed by the passengers.\textsuperscript{50} There is undeniably a degree of posturing and hypocrisy in this attitude and in the condemnations of modern whaling by authors who were themselves very interested in seeing whale bodies. The discrepancy between the \textit{Revue des Sciences} 1906 advertisement, insisting on whale hunting, and these books published after the journey, in their majority denouncing modern whaling, might also indicate the effect of the experience of the sight and smell of the dead whales: these people were attracted by whaling, hence its place in advertisements, but they turned judgemental once they had seen its reality. This discourse is remarkable in that, like the glorifying discourse on hunting, it came almost exclusively from the same demographic group of men with the means to travel and the literary pretentions to write books about their travels, the same men who were the target of these ads. It is an indication of evolutions in the ideal of masculinity that it was now increasingly acceptable, even for men, to defend animals against hunting.

The disgust which the tourists experienced at the whaling stations turned to condemnation of the Norwegian whaling practices, especially as they also understood that the whales were possibly becoming extinct. Even those who were favourable to whaling, like Rabot, explained that it was leading to the disappearance of the whales from the region, as Le Normand put it as early as 1891, “in the near future”\textsuperscript{51}. Rabot, in 1898, not only recommended that tourists participate in a hunt, he urged them to do so fast before the whales disappeared from the region.\textsuperscript{52} Not all tourists agreed on the concrete effect of whaling: for some, the whales were fleeing farther north rather than becoming extinct.\textsuperscript{53} For other tourists, whaling not only displaced but exterminated the whale stocks: their worries were an expression of a broader, nascent French environmental preoccupation with the preservation of
species. In the first decade of the twentieth century the naturalists of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris took position for protecting nature and supported actively the associations that worked towards this end. The travel accounts discussed here show that this preoccupation was not limited to scientists.

Whether tourists saw the whales as being displaced or exterminated, they all agreed in their condemnation of whaling as problematic for their touristic expectations: overhunting whales concretely meant that the tourists could not see them. Yet it became increasingly clear that the preoccupation with whales was not only a matter of personal expectations; rather, it was an integral part of broader preoccupations. The tourists seldom criticized either the individuals they encountered or Norwegians in general. What they criticized was mankind in general, and its “cupidity”: the whales were seen as being helplessly massacred for profit. The Norwegians were not singled out in these texts, but they were not spared either: they represented mankind’s abuse of Nature. Whales became symbolic of the fight against species extinction in the 1910s. The conference for the protection of nature that took place in Bern in 1913 used a whale for the frontispiece of its published acts, under the slogan “pro natura”.

Paul Sarasin, the Swiss who had convened the conference, also explained that it was the fate of the cetaceans that had prompted him to try to create an international commission for the protection of nature, or as he put it, of the “living jewels”. In a context where Norwegians dominated world whaling this made them a target, and the target was an easy one since most of the countries represented in this conference had no whaling industry.

Conclusion

Whaling on the coasts of Northern Norway was banned in 1904, and the whaling station on Skârøy was closed. Not much later in the 1900s, French publishing houses stopped publishing travel accounts from Northern Norway. This marks the end of the discourse
studied here, which flourished at the peak of both modern whaling in Northern Norway and the publishing of French travel accounts to the region: between circa 1880 and 1910, and especially around 1900. It was still possible for French tourists to experience the smell of decomposing whales, but now only further north: René Bazin smelled them on the coasts of Spitsbergen in 1906.60

In his study of French travel accounts to Norway and Sweden between 1882 and 1914, Vincent Fournier argues that, for these authors, Scandinavia served as an “ambiguous utopia” seen as ideal both in its very modern character, and in being very traditional and close to Nature.61 Yet the modernity he insists on is mostly a cultural modernity, centred on the representations of playwrights such as Ibsen and Strindberg. Industrial modernity, exemplified here by modernised whaling, does not fit as well in this utopia. It does not correspond to stereotypes of traditional Viking-like peasants or fishermen bravely fighting Nature to survive; rather, to the tourists studied in this chapter, modern whaling appeared only as a slaughter. Nor did it fit with the idea of an ideal cultural modernity, of a society culturally more advanced than France: by adding moral reflexions about whaling, based on their growing empathy for the whales, these tourists put themselves on a higher moral footing than the Norwegian whalers, whose work they commented on and whose cupidity they criticized. However, they did so only in very general terms that associated the Norwegians with the rest of humanity as destructors of species. In this sense, the intertwined disgust and fascination experienced by these tourists made them more easily aware of the impact of human practices on Nature: experiences they had during Nordic travels could therefore lead French tourists to reassess their worldview.

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Notes

1 “Chaque été, des curieux s’embarquent pour le cap Nord et décrivent ensuite en de gros volumes, à l’aide de faciles plagiats, les régions qu’ils ont parcourues en quelques jours à vol d’oiseau”. Xavier Marmier, quoted in


11 Sallès, p. 168.


13 Ibid.

14 Jones, p. 205.


17 Sallès does : Sallès, p. 145.


21 Caradec, p. 137.

22 Sallès, p. 145.


Agulhon; Corbin, ‘Le sang de Paris. Réflexions sur la généalogie de l’image de la capitale’.

Agulhon.

See for instance Sanrefus, p. 258.

“La veille, un de nos compagnons de voyage, nous ayant quittés, pour faire une fugue sur un yacht de plaisance rencontré en route, avait visité cette station de pêche à la baleine. Le récit qu’il nous fit de sa journée était empreint d’une telle horreur qu’il n’en fallut pas davantage pour décider les indécis ou les paresseux à nous accompagner”. Caradec, p. 134.


Marcot, p. 177.


Rabot, p. 266.


See for instance Albert Ier de Monaco, Albert Ier, prince de Monaco. La carrière d’un navigateur (Paris: Hachette, 1914).


Sanrefus, p. 263.

Deschamps, p. 170.

Baratay, III.

Sallès, p. 146.

Sallès, p. 149.

Le Normand, p. 21.

Rabot, p. 266.

An old idea. See Demuth, pp. 45–47.

Une Protection de l’environnement à La Française? XIXe-XXe Siècles, ed. by Charles-François Mathis, Jean-François Mouhot, and Association pour l’histoire de la protection de la nature et de l’environnement.

L’environnement a Une Histoire (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2013).


Sallès, p. 149.


See the catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Bazin, pp. 276–78.

Fournier.