

# Polish Palimpsest

## Representations of Poland and Poles in Danish Travelogues

### Summary

The monograph *Palimpsest polski. Reprezentacje Polski i Polaków w duńskich relacjach podróżniczych* [Polish Palimpsest. Representations of Poland and Poles in Danish Travelogues] analyses four accounts of actual journeys to Poland, the only such texts by Danish writers published as separate volumes. The authors under scrutiny: Georg Brandes (1842–1927), Else Moltke (1888–1986), Hilmar Wulff (1908–1984), and Dea Trier Mørch (1941–2001) travel across both geographic and discursive space. Through borrowings, repetitions, modifications, and negations they are part and parcel of a broader Danish (and European) discourse about Poland and its citizens. Hence the eponymous figure of the palimpsest (i.e., in its primary sense, a manuscript made on a writing material which has been used as a textual vehicle before yet where the text was erased but is nevertheless visible and can be read with the application of appropriate techniques). This figure is used both as a metaphor of a representation of Poland and as an indication of a multifaceted and interdisciplinary reading of the texts. It refers one to the “superimposed” image of Poland and Poles which is transtextual in nature, to use a term coined by the French theoretician of literature Gérard Genette. The following theoretical categories occupy the privileged position among the terms used in the monograph: discourse (as perceived by Michel Foucault and operationalised by Edward W. Said), intertextuality (on the basis of transtextual relations identified by Gérard Genette) and representation. This last concept is used in the dissertation as a creation of reality, its construction within the framework of native (i.e. Danish) culture codes. Thus, the author does not aim to critically (correctively) juxtapose the textual journey accounts with reality. Rather, she is interested primarily in the question of the Danish representation of Poland and Poles as emerging from the travelogues, which are hybrid textual works of art. She does so within the broader context of Danish literature and culture and of Western construction of (Central) and Eastern Europe.

The monograph is composed of six chapters, a summary, an extensive bibliography, and an annex of Danish texts with Polish episodes, motifs and elements. The first part discusses the notion of non-fiction travel literature. The author analyses its characteristic features and reflects on the relation between fact and fiction, intertextuality and strategies of representing the Other, or literary aspects of travel literature. The last sub-chapter focuses on the categories which define the four divergent poetics of the texts and authors under scrutiny:

the strategy of a creator-witness (*Indtryk fra Polen* by Georg Brades), the strategy of a raconteur (*Polish September* by Else Moltke), the strategy of idealisation (*Poland* by Hilmar Wulff), and that of an impressionist (*Poland* by Dei Trier Mørch). Chapter Two extensively contextualises the analytical part of the dissertation. It attempts to provide a comprehensive account of Danish literary representation of Poland and Poles since the 14th century (single records in monastery chronicles and annals) until today. The historical analysis of Polish elements and episodes in Danish literature revealed on the one hand the marginal aspect of Polish subjects (both in terms of quantity and status of the texts under discussion in Danish literature), and on the other hand facilitated the identification of characteristic ways of depicting Poland and Poles, i.e. applying similar interpretations and *topoi*. Poland is most often recorded at breakthrough and dramatic moments of its history. It is represented as a European symbol, a “European experiment” and a warning sign. In line with the imaginary division of Europe into “Western” and “Eastern”, i.e. following the West European discourse, Poland is shown as Europe’s inner Other. In the othering process, Poland is ascribed features such as dramatism (fate, history), temporariness/flimsiness, lack of logic, coherence and transparency, and therefore – immaturity. Crucial for the Danish representation of the country on the other side of the Baltic was, as demonstrated in the critical reflection in the dissertation, the account by Georg Brades, which came to be canonical and hegemonic. Chapters III-VI constitute the principal analytical part of the dissertation. They discuss the relations of the account authors with Poland and their position in Danish literature and culture as well as the sources of their knowledge and inspiration in reference to the subject of the monograph. This information is significant for the adequate understanding of the texts published, closely correlated with the initial “inner resources” of the narrator-author. The underlying premise is that the image of a foreign culture is constructed also through the inversion strategy, i.e. through lifting a mirror to one’s own native culture, as well as a field of experimentation of the authorial persona. A separate section is singled out in each of the analytical chapters concerning the genological and poetological aspects of the travelogues under discussion, i.e. the way they refer to the characteristics of non-fictional travel narratives identified in Chapter One and to the underlying writing strategies applied to construct the image of Poland. The main part of each chapter is dedicated to the analysis of thematic aspects such as Polish history, Poland as a country of contrasts and paradoxes, Polish women, the “nature” of Poles, and Jews in Poland. This analysis takes into account various representation strategies (e.g. mapping, othering, including inversion, essentialisation, domestication, and allochrony).

The analysis carried out in the monograph confirmed that the travel narratives show as a reverse of the depiction of the country visited an image of the author’s native culture and “inherent resources”. Thus the diagnosis of the first Danish sentimental traveller Jens Baggesen, who believed that “there is nothing more important during the journey than the *traveller*”, still holds true. The traveller becomes a “third instance”, a translator capable of showing to his or her compatriots the image of what they have experienced, observed and transformed intellectually. At the same time, we see the confirmation of the secondary, quotation nature of discourse, in this case of the Danish discourse about Poland and Poles, drawing on Western strategies of representing the Polish Other, such as locating it in the “Eastern” zone, at the intersection of the imaginary “West” and “East”. This kind of pigeonholing on the mental map of the continent is linked with the attribution to Poland of an inner rift, instability, unrest, unpredictability, immaturity and “living in the past”, the last two as a gesture orientalisising the country. The texts by the Danish writers in a way

blindly reiterate earlier ways of representation as well as enter into dialogue with them, nuance them and continue, enhancing the insight of the readership into the Polish Other. In the Danish cultural and literary context, we can see the clear canonical position of *Indtryk fra Polen* by Georg Brandes; in the remaining three texts written after the account of the 19th-century Danish literary critic I have diagnosed a number of transtextual relations, for which it is a pre-text. The travel accounts analysed were penned in different historical periods and divergent political contexts (for both Poland and Denmark) and were subject to shifting literary conventions. The question of gender is another division line which, as pointed out in the monograph, affects rather the level of observation (highlights the scale of micro-perception) than the tenor of representation, in reference to the overriding discourse. The common denominator of the travel accounts, which are at the intersection of geography, biography and literature, is the construction by the authorial and narratorial identity of a community of choice (a kind of *Wahlverwandschaft*) and the expression of solidarity with the object of representation.

*Translated into English by Marcin Turski*