

GEORG BRANDES AS AN ACTOR NARRATING A STORY ABOUT POLAND

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to investigate Brandes's impact on the Poles' self-image and to explain how he became an actor in an internal Polish network of relationships. Three aspects have been analysed with regard to this aim: the reception of Brandes in Poland, reception of Scandinavian literature in Poland as an outcome of the Danish critic's visits and his reception, and the contemporary virtual guide to Poland "Where is Poland?", where he is used to provide guidance on how to understand Poland. Actor-Network-Theory provides the inspiration for how to present the intertwined relations of Polish and Danish literary cultures, with changing actants and with Brandes being the key actor.

Keywords: Georg Brandes; Brandes' reception in Poland; literary reception; Actor-Network Theory

Georg Brandes's first visit to Poland in the 1880s was preceded by his reputation. He came to Warsaw, later to Krakow and Lvov, as an acknowledged European intellectual, an expert on literature, but also an advocate of the sovereignty of the "oppressed peoples" (*undertrykte Folk*). In the 19th century, Poland did not exist on the map of Europe as a state, its lands having been incorporated into the borders of the superpowers – Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary – and subjected to a policy of assimilation, which generated internal tension and created the need to seek support from external authorities. Brandes's visits, including at least six in the 1880s and 1890s, were guided by several objectives. The Danish critic was invited with lectures to the largest Polish cities, and his talks were accompanied by charity collections for patriotic purposes. Receptions and balls in his honour were an important part of his visits. A "Brandesian fever" broke out in the Polish lands. Brandes not only felt in Poland "the intensification of his own being" ("jeg følte mit Væsen potenseret") and, as he wrote in a letter to his mother, "no society, no city, no people suits me like the city and society of the Polish aristocrats" (Brandes 1994: 133), but he was also becoming an actor in an internal network of relationships, a catalyst for action. He also had an explicative power in relation to the Poles' self-image. He certainly played this role at the end of the 19th century, as evidenced by his reception in Polish intellectual and artistic circles. Has he retained this function until the present? Is it still possible to explain Poland of the time through Brandes?

The article aims to analyse three aspects in which the lines of the “true European” and the Polish cause are intertwined: the reception of Brandes in Poland, revealing Polish needs and contexts, the reception of Scandinavian literature in Poland as an outcome of the Danish critic’s visits and his reception, and the contemporary virtual guide to Poland “Where is Poland?”. The first two aspects has already been presented in my texts published in Polish (Schab 2018, 2021), which I am referring to (and quote) in this study in order to illustrate the relations between Poland, Poles, literature and Brandes as the pivotal factor in the web of interrelationship. To explore it the analysis undertaken in the article draws upon the actor-network theory (ANT), being rather “a loose intellectual toolkit” than “a programmatic theory” (Nimmo 2011: 109). The premises of it are co-constructed by concepts such as networks, relations, nodal points, actor and translation (cf. Latour 2000) ANT provides an inspiration for how to understand Brandes’s influence and significance for the complex system of cultural interrelationship between Poland and Denmark (or more precisely – the Polish and Danish literary cultures). Analysing Brandes’s role from such a perspective, it becomes clear that he was/is an important agent in the network of relations (an actor or an actant – according to ANT), both in the Danish discourse on Poland, in the wider European discourse, and the internal discourse on Poland. One of Brandes’s activities became the translation¹ of the Poles’ self-image, received in Polish circles with both appreciation and criticism. A vortex is created around Brandes as a key actor whose circles resonate both in his time and today. Enmeshed in relational networks (Danish, Polish and European), he was also influenced by his contemporary political, social, cultural, economic, ideological, and health contexts².

Brandes as an interpreter and spokesman for the Polish case at the turn of the 20th century

Brandes devoted considerable attention to Poland in his writings. The most extensive work concerning Poland is the five-part *Indtryk fra Polen* (“Impressions from Poland”; English translation entitled *Poland, 1903*), the first four parts of which are an account of his travels and stays in Poland, with the reflective layer that dominates in the text. The last part is dedicated to the memoirs of a woman called Maryla Wielopolska, whose status is not entirely clear³. It is complemented by a study of Polish literature of the Romantic period. In addition, Poland is the subject of his shorter journalistic and essayistic texts, including “Udflygt til Polen” (1881), “Polens Kvinder” (1901), “Til Skoleungdommen i Russisk Polen” (1905), “Polens fjerde Deling” (1909), “Ophidselse til Pogromer i russisk Polen” (1915) and many others (see Schab 2018: 77–78). Brandes undertakes the task

¹ Translation in terms of ANT is understood as the work of agents in relation to each other, the act of translation consisting in “moving actors into thought world of which they have not previously been part” (Marais 2012: 27).

² Brandes came to Poland for treatment and rehabilitation, facilitated by his friend, doctor Jan Brzezinski (Petelska 2017: 36).

³ According to Jørgen Knudsen, this refers to the memoirs sent to Brandes in 1885 by Józefa Szebeko (to whom the Danish critic also dedicated the poem *Jusja*, from the volume “Ungdomsvers”, 1902), with whom he had a close friendship and who also translated his speeches into French and Russian (Knudsen 1994: 270).

of describing and explaining Poland to his contemporaries, using both “library travel” (reading experiences), his observations, and information obtained from Polish sources. He comes to Poland equipped with knowledge (e.g., the history of his library loans preceding his visits and including items on Polish history and literature is known; cf. Schab 2018: 80), but also with apriori judgments (including stereotypical perceptions) borrowed from Western European discourse, which are partly confirmed and partly verified by him in a critical confrontation with reality. “The Scandinavian Voltaire” provided a translation in terms of ANT (see footnote 1) of the code of the European Other – Poland – into a comprehensible text, heading in various directions. Above all, his texts, written in Danish, were aimed at a native audience, as evidenced by, among other things, the use of domestication strategies and the comparative juxtaposition of the native and visited country. “Impressions from Poland”, in fact, plays the role of a hegemonic text in Danish discourse on Poland – Danes setting out on a journey not only are familiar with his accounts but also refer to them and/or quote them (see Schab, 2018). Moreover, Brandes’s writing has had a significant impact on the perception of Poland and Poles in Scandinavia (Stala 2000: 30)⁴ as well as in Europe – in this case through translations into German (1898) and English (1903) (cf. Ciesielski 1980: 215). Brandes’s voice became a compelling story of how to understand his contemporary Poland – a significant narrative which influenced the discursive image of Poland. *Indtryk fra Polen* was also translated into Polish – in 1898 (*Polska* – the first three parts, translated by Zygmunt Poznański) and 1900 (the fourth part *Lwów*, translated by Józefa Klemensiewiczowa). Apart from the previously mentioned *Hovedstrømninger...* (1881–1885), his other works including *Indtryk fra Rusland* (Polish title: *Rosya*, 1905), literary portraits of writers (2 volumes, 1893, 1894), as well as his readings presented in Poland and a number of articles and essays were also translated⁵.

Brandes’s commitment to publicising the situation in which Poland found itself, resembling, according to his eloquent metaphor, “en fin og forsvarsløs Kvinde, over hvem alle falder og som alle tramper paa” (the noble and defenceless woman whom everyone attacks and tramples on) (*Indtryk fra Polen - Polens romantiske litteratur*, p. 190), is two-fold. On the one hand, it results from the choice made by Brandes to take the side of the “oppressed peoples” (he devotes a separate publication to them, *Undertrykte Folkelag*, in which he refers to, among others, Armenians, Macedonians, Georgians, Ruthenians). In Brandes’s interpretation, their fate becomes a warning to Europe. Poland acquires the status of a European symbol in this account: “Everything found its focus on Poland: everything most hateful and revolting, and everything most radiant and worthy of greatest love; here antinomies of life in this world are shown as distinctly as in a relief; here the essence of the world is contained as if in a distillate.” (Eng. after Ciesielski 1980: 212). The fate of “... the most delicate flower of the Slavic stem” (Brandes 1900: 14) becomes a memento for Western European civilisation, which should feel warned by its example against “the triumph of an omnipresent barbarism, peeping out, in his view, from under an ever thinner civilisational polarity” (Schab 2018: 85). Brandes’s warning applies both to the Dreyfus affair in France, the Schleswig question, and to the policy of Germanisa-

⁴ For example, in a letter to Brandes, the Swedish poet Carl Snoilsky confesses: “I look at contemporary Poland through your eyes” (Ciesielski 1980: 215, after Ruben 1917: 321).

⁵ For a full list of translations, see Appendix 1 in Michalina Petelska’s (2017) dissertation, pp. 309–315.

tion and Russification in the Polish lands. Brandes sees in Poland both a fusion of East and West – Asia and Europe, full of internal contradictions and fractures, and a bulwark of civilisation – a potential to save European values from the erosion of the cultural barbarism pressing in on it, not always coming from the outside.

On the other hand, Brandes's interest in Poland stems from the enthusiastic reception he received there and from his own "Slavic mania" (Knudsen 1994: 305). In Warsaw, the Danish critic becomes the sensation of the season, and likewise later in Krakow and Lvov. The Polish dailies not only publish translations of his texts and lectures but also report on his meetings with the public; they also provide coverage of balls and sumptuous receptions in private houses in his honour⁶. As Ewa Paczoska (2012: 209) stressed it he turns up at a time when the first generation of Polish positivists is searching for a new model of realism and a new way of creating literature. For them, he becomes an important source of inspiration concerning naturalism and symbolism, as well as a model for a modern style of literary criticism. Paczoska, who has researched the latter aspect, asserts that the discussions centred around Brandes had a significant impact on how ideas about the role of literary criticism were formulated in Poland in the second half of the nineteenth century (ibid., pp. 209 ff.). Polish progressives, such as Piotr Chmielowski and Bolesław Prus, further saw in Brandes the inspiration necessary to initiate changes of a social, civilisational and aesthetic nature. The writer Bolesław Prus gave the following account of the Danish critic's visit to Warsaw in 1885: "Brandes's stay coincided with a moment when the party of stagnation is triumphing all along the line in our country and when, admittedly hard, external circumstances are lulling the general public to sleep, violently imposing it on their minds" (Prus, 2006: 161). On the other hand, in the eyes of conservative and anti-Semitic circles, Brandes was perceived as the embodiment of the enemy of everything "sacred" and "ours" – an anti-national, anti-church and subversive element, "an ally (...) of the European forces of 'darkness' and moral decay" (Paczoska 2010: 309). He was criticised for his commentaries on Polish literature of the Romantic period and accused of misunderstanding Polish culture.⁷

In summary, his reception as a literary critic reflected the division in Polish literary criticism into conservative and progressive circles. It also echoed in wider cultural circles and the *crème de la crème* of the major Polish cultural centres (Warsaw, Krakow and Lvov). It, therefore, built new links, becoming a germ of new nodal points and possible translations – both in terms of literary translations and the meaning of it according to ANT. The 'true European's readings of literature aroused interest in the Danish – and more broadly Scandinavian – literature, which will be analysed in the next section of this article. The Danish advocate of Polish independence did not visit Poland again after its establishment as an independent state. Albeit, as he admitted in one of his texts in the collection *Verdenskrigen* (1916: 122), he had never felt such enthusiasm towards any nation as he did towards the Poles. Polish public opinion, however, turned away from him, and his contacts with Poles were significantly reduced after he had published articles in the

⁶ As, for example, at the home of Mr and Mrs Wolski in Lvov in November 1898, where a brochure commemorating the Danish guest was even published – including an occasional poem by Władysław Bełza in his honour.

⁷ This paragraph is a transcription of my earlier research on Brandes's reception in Poland, published in Polish (Schab 2021 88–89).

Danish press concerning the pogroms against the Jewish population in the Polish lands. His texts were no longer reprinted after the First World War either.

Brandes as a catalyst for the reception of Scandinavian literature in Poland

Using the metaphor of a key, it can also be stated that Brandes opened the door to Scandinavia for Poles through literature. Its reception concerned both the reinforcement of realistic and naturalistic aesthetic impulses and the perception of social patterns native to the North also transmitted through literature. Both phenomena can be traced through the reception of translation⁸. According to Aleksander Świątochowski, a then popular writer, journalist and social activist of the time, the translation of *Main Currents...* into Polish “exerted such a profound and powerful influence on the progressive part of Polish society, especially on the youth, that we have not experienced something similar for many years” (quoted by Ślaski 1977: 335). The times before Brandes’s possible influence on translation decisions do not abound in translations from Scandinavian literatures. For example, in a period of more than 70 years – from the first translation of Danish literature in 1819 to 1890 – the bibliography of translations (Suchodolska, Żydanowicz, 1971) lists 87 records, 60 percent of which concern Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales (cf. Schab 2021: 83). The figures for Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish literature are respectively: 11, 66 and 136 items (ibid., p. 85). In the subsequent period that I have analysed, i.e. from 1890⁹ until the outbreak of the Second World War, there is a considerable increase in the number of translations. In the case of Danish literature, this increase is more than fivefold (466 records, approx. 35% concern the fairy tales of H.Ch. Andersen, ibid., p. 91), sixfold in the case of Norwegian literature (399 records), and fourfold when it comes to Swedish (556 records) and Icelandic literature (45 records) (ibid., p. 91). The quantitative analysis alone supports a conclusion indicating Brandes’s significant role. Analysing the translations from Danish literature in terms of the selection of authors, one can see that the focus is on Brandesian writers of the modern turn. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the largest number of records relates to the novels of the bestselling author of the early twentieth century, Karin Michaëlis, which can be explained both by economic factors (the author’s readership, her status in Europe) and by the popularity of emancipation themes as well as drawing inspiration from Scandinavia (cf. Schab 2021: 93).

It is impossible to ignore the translators when looking at the reception of translation. In fact, the first generation of authors of translations was formed by female literary enthusiasts and admirers of Brandes, who knew him personally, had met him and corresponded with him. From ANT perspective he plays a role of an actor activating other actants in the network. Under his influence, they began to learn Danish, helped to translate his

⁸ Supplemented by the press reception of Scandinavian literatures - this, however, has not yet been systematically researched.

⁹ I have arbitrarily adopted the year of 1880 as the caesura as I assume that it can mark the moment from which Brandes’s influence could gain real strength – owing to the translations of *Main Currents...*, his repeated visits to Poland, the publication of *Indtryk fra Polen* and its translation into Polish.

speeches into French and Russian, and made literary translations (though mostly from German). Along with the contribution of Józefa Szebeko (1859–1945), a social activist, journalist and later senator of the Republic of Poland (1922–1927), as well as the writers and social activists Wanda Młodnicka (1850–1923) and her daughter Maryla Wolska (1873–1930); the activity of Józefa Klemensiewiczowa (1862–1938) deserves a special mention. The latter not only adapted several dozen literary works of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish literature into Polish but also actively promoted them through lectures and articles published in popular magazines and newspapers. In 1914, her historical-literary survey of Scandinavian literature – *Literatura Skandynawii* – was published in Krakow. This publication targeted a wider audience and was the first historical-literary outline of the Scandinavian cultural circle. George Brandes is referred to therein with an emphasis on his role in shaping naturalistic attitudes in literature, as well as his influence on literary discourse about Poland (e.g. in the works of Valdemar Rørdam and Agnes Henningsen) (Klemensiewiczowa, 1914: 90, 101).

Brandes as a guide to Poland in the 21st century

In the 2010s, a marked increase of interest concerning Georg Brandes in Poland could be observed. The Danish critic was revived in academic circles, as evidenced by numerous studies on the reception of his works and the history of Polish-Danish contacts through him, as well as new readings of his texts. It is worth noting that this involves researchers coming from different academic centres, who did not collaborate at the stage of preparing their analyses (see Bukowski 2017, 2018; Paczoska 2010, 2012, 2015; Pessel 2010, 2012; Petelska 2010, 2012, 2016, 2017; Płaszczewska 2016; Schab 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2018). In 2018, the Polish government agency, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, provided an interactive English-language portal “Where is Poland? The story of Poland under the partition seen through a foreigner’s eyes”, based on Brandes’s accounts of his travels in Poland¹⁰. It formed part of the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of independence, within the framework of the official “Independent” [Pl. *Niepodległa*] programme. In the introduction, the Danish critic is presented as a European authority – “one of the leading figures of European intellectual life”. The audience moves through the content on Polish history in the 19th century accompanied by Brandes as a guide, who is both visible in photographs and films and who speaks through quotations from his writings on Poland. The narrative of the nine chapters is built upon selected aspects presented in Brandes’s account: a walk in Warsaw, Russification/Germanisation, literature, censorship, the position and emancipation of women, what Poland is and who Poles are. The portal user can also solve practical tasks, such as playing the role of a customs officer and searching Brandes’s luggage, including books (a reference to the scene depicting the crossing of the borders of the civilised world from *Indtryk fra Polen*)¹¹, or exercises in the use of the Aesopian language (of which Brandes claims to be a master in his account).

¹⁰ <https://whereispoland.com/en>

¹¹ “Thus on the very frontier itself we got the feeling that from this point we were outside the precincts of real European civilisation.”

Why, 100 years after his disappearance from the Polish public space, has Brandes been reintroduced into it? Firstly, because the portal is addressed to foreigners (e.g., it does not provide a Polish-language version, yet a Russian-language one is available). The recognisability of the guide to the “country that doesn’t exist” therefore relates to his high status outside Poland. The employment of the Danish critic is intended to provide an outsider’s perspective that the audience of this multimedia project might recognise. Brandes has been embedded in a broader context – a network of connections that is beyond a national (‘Polish’ or ‘Danish’) scope. At the same time, the figure of the “activist critic” has been instrumentalised – his significance being reduced to the role of a guide to an exotic country, Poland, and a slogan evoking associations with the intellectual authority of his time. Brandes’s role as an actor in the network of Polish-Danish ties has been redefined. It is determined by relations that have been mediated and inscribed in contemporary political, historical and cultural contexts – contrasting with those of the nineteenth century. In these contemporary contexts, the Danish critic functions as an icon, known in Poland mainly to a small circle of experts. This update has been fostered by a network of connections co-created by both the government agency responsible for the project of the Multiannual Programme Independent [Pl. Niepodległa] (2017–2022), the initiators, researchers and executors of the project, and Scandinavian scholars interested in Brandes and the renaissance of interest in him in the Polish context (the project’s consultants included Włodzimierz Karol Pessel and Michalina Petelska). The choice of Brandes as a guide was justified by the portal’s creators as follows:

The guide has been designed with the foreign reader in mind, unacquainted with Polish history. Therefore, the narrator is a foreigner, for whom this is also his first encounter with Polish society. As an outsider, he looks at it with empathy and kindness, but not uncritically. From a distance, he looks back on a crucial period in Polish history – a moment when the political fate of a country divided by its borders was still being decided, and when future independence was by no means certain.¹²

Analysing the reception of the multimedia guide among English- and Russian-speaking audiences is beyond the scope of this article. It is also difficult to judge whether Georg Brandes has thus returned to the intra-Polish cultural circulation. What seems certain is that in 2019 “Where is Poland?” was appreciated by an international jury and honoured with the Silver European Design Award in the category “Digital – Information Site”.

* * *

The network of which Georg Brandes is a part is opening up to new contexts. It is unstable and unfixed, unpetrified, as new actants are involved (like the nonhuman interactive “Where is Poland?” portal) and new kinds of relations established. Due to the most recent wave of circulation of Brandes’s contribution concerning the Polish context new kinds of translations (understood in terms of ANT) are possible. All the mentioned factors make the network still productive. It is co-created by interpersonal and intercultural relations, subject to conjunctures, moods and emotions that are often difficult to capture

¹² <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/where-is-poland-multimedialny-przewodnik-culturepl>

through the use of analytical language. In summary, Brandes's role as an expert on Poland and a European icon in the European discourse on Poland has been maintained.

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Web Portal:

<https://whereispoland.com/en>