

THINKING THE OTHER'S LOCAL IN GLOBAL TERMS – ÅGE MEYER BENEDICTSEN (1866–1927) AND HIS BOOK ON LITHUANIA

Ieva Steponavičiūtė
Vilnius University
ieva.steponaviciute@flf.vu.lt

Abstract

The aim of the contribution is twofold. Firstly, it will present Åge Meyer Benedictsen (1866-1927) as an individual who, although not widely known, has contributed significantly to cultural exchange between Denmark and a number of countries which did not exist on the political map of his time. The contribution will outline his broad activities, which ranged from the study of languages and globetrotting to literary translations, public lectures, humanitarian work and writing. Secondly, the focus will turn to his book, *Et Folk der vaagner. Kulturbilleder fra Litaven* (1895), which is placed in the historical context of Lithuania's colonization by two world powers, Germany and Russia, as well as its national awakening, which took place at the end of the nineteenth century and which Benedictsen personally experienced. It will further deal with Benedictsen's treatment of his material, the attempt to provide a holistic picture of Lithuanian life by covering its multiple aspects: geography, history, customs, mythology, folk culture, political and social circumstances. Special emphasis will be given to Benedictsen's view of culture as a key aspect in the formation of national consciousness, which was much influenced by Herder's thought. The contribution will comment on Benedictsen's translation of Lithuanian songs and raise questions for further investigation. In addition, some literary strategies of the book, through which it transgresses the conventional boundaries of ethnographic writing, will be discussed. Finally, the contribution will reflect on the possible significance of this book and its relevance for the present day.

Keywords

Åge Meyer Benedictsen, humanism, Lithuanian-Danish contacts, cultural dimension in nation building, Lithuanian folksongs, literary aspects of ethnographic writing, popular education.

"The interpreter for oppressed nations"

The inscription on Åge Meyer Benedictsen's gravestone, a reference to the Viking custom to inscribe a person's life in the memory of future generations, reads: "De undertrykte Nationers Tolk/En lysende Aand for det danske Folk / Venner, hans ædle/Virke vandt ham/satte Sten/ over Stridsmand god". Sadly, few Danes know his name, but it is not completely forgotten. A search in a library catalogue will produce an extensive list of his publications, for example: "Jøderne og Jødehadet" (1906), "Indien og Europa" (1909), "Irlands Folkekamp" (1910), "Overblik over det islandske Folks Historie" (1918) "Mennesket og menneskeracerne" (1922), *Et Folk der vaagner. Kulturbilleder fra Litaven*, 1895, *Armenien – Et Folks Liv og Kamp gennem to Årtusinder*, 1925). The last book (and Benedictsen's role in the society "De danske Armeniervenner"), has made him a key agent in the Danish discourse on Armenian Genocide

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(especially in Bjørnlund, 2008, 2015). He was also an advocate of Iceland's autonomy, so his name figures in the documents of "Dansk-Islandsk Samfund".

Benedictsen has left a mark in linguistics, although he did not complete his degree in the field and became an ethnologist (Schütte, 1935). The Danish Iranist A. Christensen (¹⁹³⁴, 144), for whom Benedictsen had collected oral Awromāni narratives, praised the high quality of his research. Benedictsen was also a translator. Possibly inspired by Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*, he chose works which best represented the aspirations of the people he set out to voice: novels by B. Nemcova, I. Vazof, J. Aho, E. Orzeszkowa, H. Sienkiewicz, poems by J. Słowacki and A. Mickiewicz. He has also translated N. Gogol's *Dead Souls* and *Government Inspector* and written essays on Slavic literature (Læssøe Müller, 1979).

Benedictsen was, however, a humanist first and foremost, who continued Grundvig's tradition of popular education by spreading knowledge about oppressed peoples from around the globe.¹ It was always the human being who was the ultimate object of his travels: "Jeg søger efter mennesket og spejder efter hans tankesæt, hans lykkefølelse", – he wrote in a letter from Persia (Benedictsen, 1935,14).

His entire work can be called a "Quest for Happiness", and this happiness was not the quester's own.² This quest came to encompass entire nations under a foreign rule, including the Lithuanians. The paper will in the following focus on his book about Lithuania³ and claim its relevance for the present day.

Nationalism as a cultural breakthrough

Benedictsen first came to Lithuania in the early 1890s, when the country as such did not exist. What had once been the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, was divided between Prussia and Russia after the third partition of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth (1795). Its name was known only to a few linguists and those interested in folklore.⁴ Benedictsen had a very good command of Russian, Polish and German and had studied Lithuanian in Copenhagen with Prof K. Verner (Ørveille 1997, 260). Thus he was not only able to recount his own experience, but also to refer to texts by local authors: the historian S. Daukantas, the poets L. Rhesa and K. Donelaitis, the ethnographer L. A. Jucewicz and others. His book remains one of the most exhaustive accounts about Lithuanians as an ethnic group: Benedictsen meticulously describes its history, mythology, customs, language, folklore, its conditions under the German and Russian coloniser, its complicated relations with its historical allies Poles, and to some extent also Jews.

¹ His immense success as a lecturer is well-documented (SNK, 1921, 481; Marinus, 1966, 1). Even the anti-Semitic "Dansk national Tidsskrift" recognised his oratory talent ("sleske Veltalenhed"), although in an overtly biased way (quoted from Thing, 2008, 476). At a time without global radio and TV, his lectures, based on his travels, must have been the most immediate channel for the Danish people to the outside world.

² Halldór Laxness mentions his kindness in the book *Úngur eg var* (Laxness 1976, 213) – he was in his youth helped by Benedictsen to settle in Denmark and mature as a writer.

³ Meyer, 1895. All the subsequent quotes will refer to this edition, with page numbers indicated in brackets.

⁴ Lithuanian is one of the most conservative Indo-European languages, and therefore of great interest to linguists; Lithuanian songs were included into J. G. von Herder's collections of folk songs and mentioned by G. Brandes in his *Indtryk fra Polen* (1888).

The book first came out in Lithuanian in 1997, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nobody could translate it under tsarist rule and any mention of the aspirations to independence, albeit vis-à-vis a different regime, was a taboo under the Soviet occupation. During the short period of Lithuanian independence (1918-1940), the book was translated into English and published in 1924 as *Lithuania, the Awakening of a Nation* on the Lithuanian diplomat J. Savickis' initiative.

Benedictsen's aim was to create understanding in Denmark for the Lithuanian national awakening, which was about to take shape at that time. The memory of the Holocaust and growing xenophobia oblige us to be alert when dealing with nationalism, however, Benedictsen, in 1895, already demonstrated full awareness of its complexity. In the preface, he warns his reader against its negative sides and he dedicates his work to G. Brandes whom he calls:

[E]n Talsmand for det højnende i de nationale Følelser, og kun Modstander af dem, hvor de driver over i Fladhed og Uskønhed, en varm Forsvarer for dem, hvor de giver et Folk Æresfølelse og er rummelige og stærke nok til at huse den store Verdens Tanker, men en ubøjjelig Angriber, hvor de nationale Følelser vil bygge en Mur af Fordom om egne Skavanker og eget Smaatsyn. (p. 8)

What Benedictsen was observing during his long visits to Lithuania was the loss of that "æresfølelse": civilizational standstill, growing alcoholism and degradation of morals. He associated this decline with the people's impeded cultural development, as the result of ethnic discrimination policies (p. 233, 206, 244). Benedictsen realised that Lithuanian ethnicity was very much a social issue. Lithuanian speaking people were exclusively peasants and in the Russian part, there was a further overlapping of class and ethnic divisions. The bureaucracy was in the hands of Russian emissaries, often uncultivated and with a criminal record, the nobility and clergy were Poles or Polish speaking Lithuanians, while manufacture, finance and trade (especially that of alcohol) were concentrated in the hands of the Jews (p. 226). Of all these groups, Lithuanian peasants, according to Benedictsen, suffered most. In the German part, it was possible for a Lithuanian to cross the class boundary by adopting the coloniser's language and culture. This, of course, led to the loss of Lithuanian ethnicity (pp. 160-165), although *Litauische Literarische Gesellschaft* took measures to preserve the language as a scholarly subject (p. 166).⁵ Benedictsen saw that the cultural and social implications of Russian rule were even more devastating (p. 200). There was panoptic control of not only public, but also private life, coupled with severe punitive measures. Collective gatherings were banned, including those of the temperance movement. The Polish University in Vilnius was closed, school education was in Russian, a child from a mixed family was automatically attributed to the Russian Orthodox church. An especially hard cultural trauma was the ban on Lithuanian print – "en Bøddelgærning mod hele det gryende, aandelige Liv" (p. 197) In the midst of this misery Benedictsen witnessed the formation of a new social group, who set out to awaken national

⁵ Benedictsen did not consider this as a valid alternative to the living language and he especially valued the activities of G. Sauerwein, who tried to awaken linguistic pride and self-respect in the peasants themselves (p. 170).

awareness in Lithuanian people. Sons of wealthier farmers got their university education in Moscow or St. Petersburg and returned home with a new intellectual capacity and quite "radicalised". They started an enlightenment campaign, published papers with political and also cultural content in the Prussian part and had them smuggled into the mainland. They organised secret Lithuanian schools and appealed to the Polish speaking nobility for rediscovering their Lithuanian roots.⁶

This movement was not only persecuted by the Russian regime. Benedictsen noted the moral confusion among Lithuanians themselves: there were "Judases" who would for five roubles show the gendarmes the hiding places for prohibited press (p. 244). To Benedictsen's great regret, the movement was also strongly opposed by Polish priests and the higher class, and this antagonised the two nationalities, both of which suffered under Russian rule (p. 243).

Lithuanian dainos

It must be clear by now that culture plays a key role in Benedictsen's thinking about the formation of a nation. Lithuanians had nothing, which had been written in their mother tongue, that could compare to Icelandic sagas or Polish Romantic poetry and serve as a unifying source of national pride,⁷ however, Benedictsen saw an alternative in the Lithuanian folk song tradition. As Herder, who in his *Volkslieder* quoted Lessing's admiration for the "naïve wit" and "lovely simplicity" of these songs (Smidchens, 2014, 28), Benedictsen notes their simple form: "det er lutter Stemningsdigtning [...] men aldrig uden Sandhed, sjældent uden Skønhed" (p. 88). And as Herder, who subsequently recognised their universality and saw in them "a fundamental expression of human love" (ibid, 28), Benedictsen aspires to convey their universal concerns. He translates about fifty Lithuanian *dainos* or their fragments: songs about Eros "sub rosa loqui", songs about the beauty of nature and simple everyday charms, songs of sorrow and of fear for war. He uses songs as illustrations of Lithuanian folk beliefs, translates songs, which were part of Lithuanian wedding rituals and even renders in Danish one *rauda* (a lament).

When translating the songs, Benedictsen seems to have used written sources.⁸ Since Benedictsen relied on other collectors, he did not escape the typical mistake of taking an authorial text for folk creation. Some cases have been discussed by S. Matulevičienė (2000, 97). The issue can be extended to two other songs, which are now claimed to be poetic forgeries by Rhesa (Subačius, 2008, 83). The first one, "Mėnū Sauluzę wede" / "Det var i unge Vaaren" (p. 42), which relates the story of marriage and betrayal between the Sun and the Moon, was supposed to illustrate the ties between Lithuanian and Vedic mythology.⁹ Benedictsen's

⁶ Benedictsen's description of the decisive role of the new Lithuanian intelligentsia in the formation of the Lithuanian nation reminds of the developments M. Hroch (1985, 86-97) presents in his seminal study.

⁷ Therefore, the myth of the grand Lithuanian pagan history, which Benedictsen both conveys and is sceptical about (p. 236), turned out to be crucial in later development of Lithuanian national consciousness, see Venclova (2009, p. 33).

⁸ He followed their content very closely, therefore it was possible for the Lithuanian translator to trace most of them back to their Lithuanian recorded versions.

⁹ This song has acquired a wide international circulation as an authentic folk song, see, for example, Nunzio, 2014, 119; West, 2007, 234.

translation poses further textological questions. He must have used a different source than Rhesa's collection to which the Lithuanian translation refers (Benedictsen, 1999, 48). It had to be one in which the poem contained the additional final line – with a tint of Romantic *Weltschmerz*: "Da sørged Maanen svarlig" (p. 42) / "Szirdis pilna smutnybės" / "Da war sein Herz voll Trauer". Most likely, it was the bilingual *Littauische Volkslieder* (Nesselman, 1853, 1). However, despite the faulty attribution of this text to the folk tradition, Benedictsen makes correct assumptions about its mythological reflections, since similar plot patterns are found in other Baltic mythological material (Jovaišas, 1969, 262).

Neither does the identification of the song "Dainok, Sesyte!" (Rhesa, 1843, 94-96) / "Saa syng dog Søster" (p. 134) as a folk song deny the validity of Benedictsen's reference to the Viking raids on the Baltic coast as a historical fact (see Kasekamp, 2010, 9). Nevertheless, it is ironic that the lines:

I Nattens Mørke
kom Mænd fra Havet
Med Vold de brød vor Gærde
Og øded' Pryd og Ære

which for Benedictsen create this reference, are Rhesa's interpolation into a wedding song (see Jovaišas, 1969, 264).

Benedictsen's translations of the songs call for further investigation: according to Schütte (1935), there has been an important contribution from Benedictsen's first wife Jeanette Schønheyder van Deurs. This may explain their intensified lyrical effect, however, Benedictsen himself reflects on the translation strategy: the role of the melody must be compensated for by rhyme in the Danish text (p. 93). The translator takes care to avoid rhyme in the last syllable, and this is consistent with the author's claim that this is a feature of later songs, which cannot compete in poetic quality with old ones (p. 92). The question who translated the songs into English (they are much closer to Benedictsen's Danish texts than to German or Lithuanian sources) also remains open.¹⁰

Despite of these uncertainties and of Benedictsen's sometimes faulty interpretations, his book continues to be the sole collection of Lithuanian songs in Danish. It may attract new contexts as it refers to the tradition which has been inscribed into UNESCO's list of intangible world heritage, and which has played a key role in Lithuania's second national rebirth in late 1980ies – the Singing Revolution (see Martinelli, 2016, 637).

Literary ethnography

When Benedictsen treats folk songs as "Das Archiv des Volkes" (Herder, 2011, 44) and tries to extract from them the image of the "Proto-Lithuanian" (pp. 93-94), or when he describes the peculiarities of the language (p. 40), he comes closest to writing as a scholar. However, there is

¹⁰ The absence of Danish archival material related to this book (Ørveille, 1999, 263) and of Savickis' archives complicates these tasks.

too much of a literary man in him and too much passion to retain the tone of impartial observer. Sometimes, he borrows another person's voice, when he, for example, tells of Lithuania's past by following the Romantic historian Daukantas (pp. 135-144) or when he renders the myth of the sea queen Jurata (pp. 44-45) as it has been shaped by Jucewicz (1842, 103-109). Here Benedictsen acts as a skilful translator, sensitive to the style and imagery of the original text. There are also passages, which read as lyrical prose – rich in metaphors, similes or anaphoric constructions – as the one quoted below:

Hver Fugl, hvert Dyr, og mange Planter havde deres Forvandlingshistorie, i Reglen lidt barnlig plumpe, men undertiden af en Skønhedsfylde, der kan kappes med Ovids Metamorfofer. Hver levende Skabning var for Litaverne et af Guderne forvandlet Menneske eller senere af den kristne Gud straffet for en Brøde eller belønnet med Tillidshverv i Naturens store Rige. (p. 55)

The literariness of the book is also foregrounded by the narrative agency's overt and fluid presence. We follow the narrator's gaze, which wanders through ancient forests, or peeps into the people's dwellings and churches; he lends us his ear, when he listens to the young bargees' singing (p. 91) or the dialogue between his Jewish guide and the Russian border guard (p. 185). Even if he relates things without referring to himself, he seldom refrains from making a personal comment: "Der på sin Mark... staar en ung Litaver, som man saa dejlig kunde tage for en dansk eller svensk Bonde..." (p. 20); "Kommer man ind i sekliče, hvor Beboerne er samlede, da gør det undertiden et Indtryk paa en, som besøgte man sine Forfædre for 1000 år tilbage" (p. 29). Sometimes the narrator bursts with feelings, when he, for example, expresses his outrage at the world's blindness to Russia's brutality in connection with the Kražiai massacre: "Man kunde fristes til at raabe med Shakespeare: Tvi, over denne Verden, en uluget Have, der bulner af Ukrudt!" (p. 219).

Gabriele Schwab, who has investigated the transformative power of ethnographic fiction, claims that it can change the readers' attitudes by establishing a contact with their mental structures and emotions (Schwab, 2012, 12-15). The appeal to the Danish reader's own experience seems also to be Benedictsen's consistent strategy. The readers are drawn into the unfamiliar country with the help of recognisable physical reality or by evoking their compassion, as quoted above. Political parallels are established (the situation in East Prussia reminded the Danes of that in Northern Schleswig, p. 165), and a common cultural framework is built: Benedictsen finds Eddaic wisdom in Lithuanian folklore (p. 112)¹¹ and calls K. Donelaitis' classical poem "Metai" (The Seasons, ca. 1765-1775) "et stort Drapa om Litaven" (p. 153).

The narrator's desire to engage his reader is felt already in the first sentence of the book:

¹¹ Although this parallel has also been exposed as another Romantic manipulation, this time by Jucewicz (see Vélius, 2013, p. 154), it is still indicative of the presence of Old Norse literature in 19th. century Lithuania – through J. Lelewel's Polish paraphrase of the Eddas (1807).

Til dig, min Modstander, retter jeg disse indledende Ord. Din overlegne Tvivl om det berettigede i Folkeslagenes nationale Selvstændighedstrang har mere end noget andet lokket mig til at skrive denne lille Bog. (p. 1)

In the chapter that follows, the narrator materialises himself in person and indirectly encourages the reader to trespass the boundaries of conventional thinking. In this expressive scene, the narrator's commits a truly transgressive move – both realistically and metaphorically:

Jeg anede ikke, at Rusland var saa nær. Da saa jeg pludselig den lille Aa glimte i Solen og bag den noget hvidt – en Soldat, stiv og strunk, Geværet med opplantet Bajonet i Armen, og lidt længer [sic] borte en til – og atter en i den svindende Horizont, Soldater, saa langt Øjet rakte [...] Jeg saa lidt paa Soldaten derovre, paa hans solbrændte, skægløse Ansigt og de smaa missende Øjne. Skulde han virkelig være en saa ubøjelig Bevogter? Hør Du, hvad vil Du have for, at jeg maa sætte Foden i Dit Land? Jeg fik saa uimodstaaelig Lyst dertil. – "Kom bare, men skynd Dig lidt, medens jeg vender Ryggen til". – Saa kom jeg da et Øjeblik til Rusland, rigtignok med Uro i Kroppen for, at min nye Ven skulde forandre Sindelag og sende mig en Kugle i Livet eller i det mindste anholde mig; men han tog imod en Cigar og trykkede min Haand, og så pjaskede jeg over Aaen igen. – Det hele blev paa en Gang saa hyggeligt og menneskeligt, at jeg følte mig Ganske lettet. (p. 11-12)

In another episode the narrator is, in contrast, hiding under the guise of a third person character (p. 160). Here the spotlight falls on an old mother, whose image symbolically conveys the stigma of the Lithuanian language in East Prussia. She travels on the same ship as her son, but he ignores her in the presence of his German speaking buddies. By taking on an anonymous identity, the narrator draws the reader's attention to his protagonist's silent drama and modestly conceals his role as a helping hero: "Den utroværdige Søn fik for alles Øjne Lov at kendes ved sin Moder, det sørgede Herren for. Han spurgte ham, om han ogsaa sammen med sit Modersmaal havde glemt det fjerde Bud" (ibid.).

These are only some examples that bring the book closer to *belles-lettres* than to traditional ethnographic writing. It must have been one of the reasons for the book's success – if we are to believe Savickis (1934, 156) or one Danish article, printed in Gothic script, which especially mentions the attention the book it received "i vide Kredse". The author of the present paper has acquired the clip from Benedictsens family, but unfortunately its date and origin are impossible to trace.

The significance of the book

The most tangible proof of the book's enduring value is its mention in contemporary studies (Briedis, 2016, 30; Pocevičius, 2016, 479-450; Kalnius, 2010, 20; Kasparavičius, 2006, 302). Its importance as a depository of Lithuanian songs has already been claimed. It is difficult to pinpoint its significance more exactly – it may be scattered through different fields – as complex as the book is.

The historian V. Mažeika (2002, 291), who has analysed Lithuanian-Danish relations in the inter-war period, is sceptical: Benedictsen's book has hardly achieved more than evoking sympathy with its Danish reader – several decades later, little was known in Denmark about Lithuania. However, Benedictsen's book was chosen by Savickis from several books written about the country (Benedictsen, 1924, 14) with the aim to create international awareness about the new Lithuanian state. Savickis would have hardly done that had he not believed that the book had left a trace in the Danish people's minds. It is even possible, that the Danish farmers who came to Lithuania in the twenties (Mažeika, 2002, 299) were inspired by Benedictsen's descriptions of the rich Lithuanian soil which cried for progressive ways of farming (p. 259).

According to Bjørnlund (2007, 12), Benedictsen has even contributed to (re)constructing the Lithuanian nation. Indeed, the book collects in one piece its major ingredients: history, geography and culture, traditions, language, etc. It has been widely used in Lithuanian public discourse to encourage national confidence, which was repressed under the Soviet rule.¹² It has, unfortunately, also been misused in internet fora, as an argument against the "perils of globalisation"¹³ and in some cases, in support of xenophobic views. Now, when many Lithuanians question ethnocentric ideals, re-evaluate the myth of Lithuania as a nation of "innocent sufferers" (Clark, 2006, 162)¹⁴ and see the future of the country as an open civil society, Benedictsen's book gains special relevance. As a possible self-check with regard to the situation of the state's own minorities and a reminder of the danger for a nation to "build walls of prejudice around its own pettiness" (see the earlier quoted dedication to Brandes).

And finally, Benedictsen's book can serve as a beautiful example of the convergence of two – out of many – meanings of the term humanism: *Humanismus*, the nineteenth century German term for humanities and *humanism*, as a fundamental claim to value the dignity of the Other's life.

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¹² This sentiment was the major ethos of the first conference held in Vilnius in 1999 in Benedictsen's honour, see Tulevičius et al., 2000.

¹³ Benedictsen seems to be concerned about it only to the extent it poses a threat to the world's diversity, see p. 3.

¹⁴ For example, the historical situation of Jews in Lithuania has become an important topic, which finds expression in civil actions, such as the Molėtai memorial march (2016), and is explored in scholarly and popular books, as well as in literature and art, see Žukauskienė 2014.

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Biographical note

Ieva Steponavčiūtė, PhD, associate professor at the Centre of Scandinavian Studies, Vilnius University, has published the monograph *Texts at Play: The Ludic Aspect of Karen Blixen's Writings* (2011) and a number of articles on modern Scandinavian literature. Responsible editor for the *Scandinavistica Vilnensis* series.