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Palimpsest, Memory and Agency in Faroese/Danish Memory Politics

- National Stereotypes in the Canonization of a Faroese National Hero.

In this paper I will analyse the creation and the dynamics of memory seen through the canonization of a 19th Century writer in Nólsoyar Páll as a national hero in the Faroe Islands. Combining approaches from cultural nationalism studies (working with literature), memory studies and imagology. We will investigate the use of cultural saints and national hero's. I will argue, that narratives of hero's recycle earlier forms of remembrance and images as in the metaphorical palimpsest figure seen through monuments and places of memory. Here is the question, how did we proceed from the mangrove swamp of different ethnic self-images to a instrumentalization of an image of the Faroe Islands? How did the use of the literary archive and the memory of the Faroe Islanders relate to a canonization of literature and national hero's in a time of historical and political change?

In 1892 the Faroese scholar Dr. Jacob Jakobsen held eight lectures in the Faroes Union in Copenhagen about Faroese language and history. He put forward three special Faroese. The character from Faroe Saga Tróndur, the naval hero Magnus Heinason and most of all the Faroese captain and poet Nólsoyar Páll (from now on NP). At this point NP became a cultural hero and a national hero of the young Faroese nation.

NP name was Poul Poulsen Nolsøe (1766-1808), captain and a poet. He had his education in the Ryberg Trade Union in the Faroe Islands. Later he got a partial permit to trade, but soon he and his ship Royndin Fríða were lost in 1808. Dr. Jacobsen claims he was shot down by the Danish ships or ships allied with the Danes.

In 1806-1807 he wrote the Fuglakvæði (The Bird Ballad), with this famous opening verse: "The bird on the beach/ he has such a red beak/ without it many/ a creature/proud bird, would have meet his death/The bird on the beach". The ballad is satirical and political. In relation to modern ballads, it is written in the genre called "táttur" or the so-called literary ballad that imitates the form, the language and the spirit of the traditional

ballad but is written about contemporary issues and themes¹. In an allegorical manner he attacked his opponents, by introducing them in the images of birds of prey. He himself is seen in the image of the Tjaldur (the oyster-catcher, guarding the small birds against the birds of prey). The uncertainty of his disappearance has only enhanced the widespread mythology about this man².

In the ballad the Tjaldur is the protector of the smaller birds (later this was turned into the image of the Faroese people) against ravens and other birds of prey. With this image we see a distinct creation of an early discourse making a distinction between the image of the foreign and what was local or regional. It would be to go too far, to call these images a fully fledged nationalism or as so often later suggested, the first anti-colonial discourse. But here we see some of the first self-images emerge. In the trope of the hurting Tjaldur, is an epic of being a victim and this trope became powerful later. The Tjaldur was elected to the national bird in the Faroes, with reference to the "Bird Ballad".

In 1912 Dr. Jacobsen wrote a book on the life of NP. This book had an impact in commemorating him and his traumatized death as a martyr and a victim of conspiracies and aggressive colonialism.

In the nineteenth century we witnessed the growth of cultural nationalism as a dominant force in the political and literary life of European nations (Thiesse, 2001). All over Europe we saw the building of national pantheons of writers and artists. In this paper I want to chart some of the development and their impact on the national self-image. Also I want to analyze the importance of memory and stereotypes in relation to literature and the cultural national revival. In the following we will introduce some of the key notions we are going to use in analysing NP's way towards becoming a national hero.

¹ The genre of the 'Táttur' is also interesting. The Táttur is a satirical ballad, according to Mortan Nolsøe, the genre is indigenous Faroese and has never travelled outside the Faroes (Nolsøe: In: Gaffin, 1996, p. 194). The American anthropologist Dennis Gaffin states that the táttur is a form of verbal ridicule and a public spectacle and a part of a form of verbal virtuosity and control communication embedded in a particular form of "physical and social landscapes of the islands" (Ibid. p. 195). Otherwise ballads in general were a much-used form of literature in the age of romanticism. We know of ballads like these from great writers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Erköning" from 1782, Samuel Taylor Coleridge "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Sir. Walter Scott "Proud Maislie" and John Keats "La Belle Dame sans Merci".

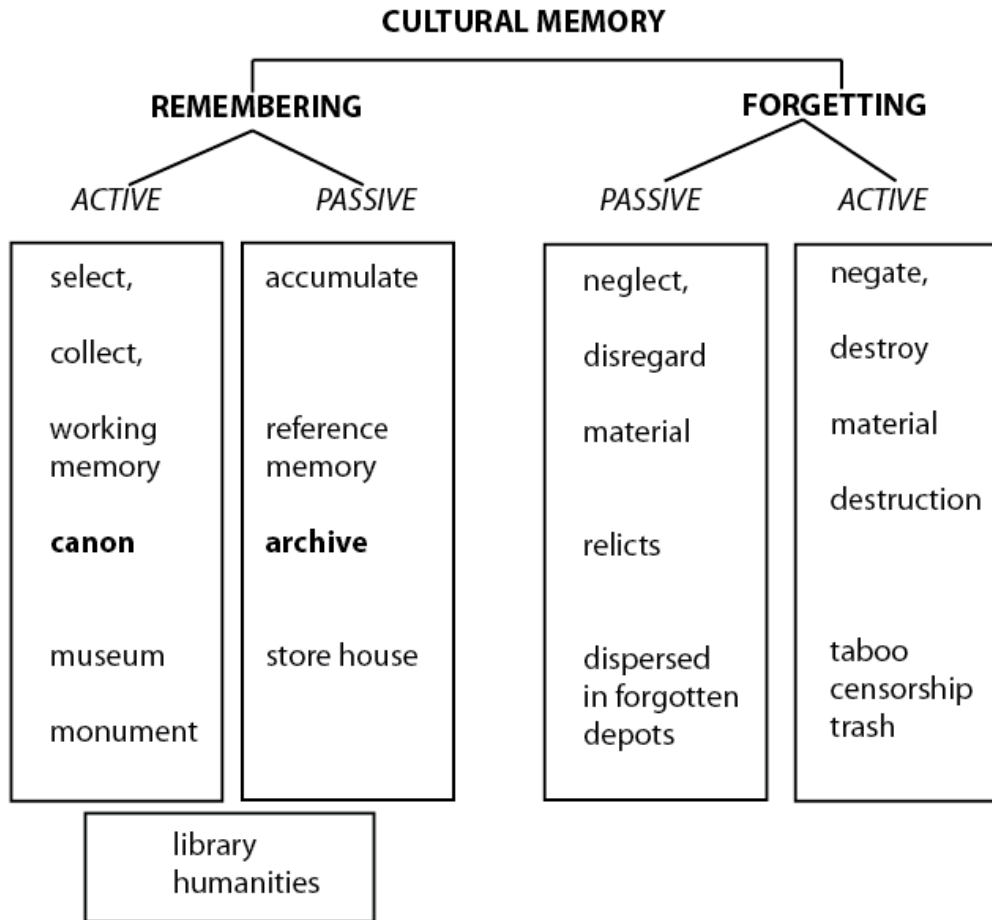
² In the ballad collection CCF 190 vol. VI we find the 'younger' bird ballad (Fuglakvæði I) it is about birds. Both in Norwegian and in Danish versions of this ballad, we do not know why the birds are gathering. If the ballad was an allegorical tale, the meaning of it is lost. We also know of ballads about birds, as for example "Ørnevisen" (The Ballad of the Eagle).

The Palimpsest

If we begin with memory a palimpsest is a manuscript page from a scroll or book that has been scraped off and used again³. The palimpsest is a figure of both destruction and of creation and also of memory and forgetting, since this figure implies new writing and often it has been possible to recreate what has been scraped of (Møller, 2011). In this way we will see the traces of memory and how the palimpsest will activate images and memories between the past, the present and the future. The term can be used to tie together complex forms of public memory. Andreas Huyssen offers the idea of the palimpsest as a methodological tool for evaluating sites of memory culture (Huyssen, 2003). The palimpsest is also a paradox, since the lost meaning of scraped of text can be made visible (Jacobus, 1984, p. 238). According to Jan and Alaida Assmann cultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it gives to these people a collective cultural identity (Assmann, 1998). To select memories is the most important way to make for example a nation. Maurice Halbwachs was careful not to include traditions in his definition of collective memory, while the Assmann's insist on including the cultural sphere by breaking the concept into two different ones, 'communicative' and cultural memory. I will only focus on the latter. Another side of working with memory is to look at what has been sidelined or forgotten, as Paul Connerton implies, modernity has its own memory and place memory and especially a topography of forgetting (Connerton, 2009, p. 5). According to Nora, we have become addicted to places of memory who have taken the place of society's remembrance work (Nora, 1989).

Alaida Assmann mediates between remembering and forgetting and the agency of passive and active memory. Here the canon is the active remembrance and the archive the passive, as we see in this model:

³ The word comes from *palin* meaning again, and *psestos* meaning scraped.



The passive form of cultural forgetting is related to non-intentional acts such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning, or leaving something behind. In these cases the objects are not materially destroyed; they fall out of the frames of attention, valuation, and use. What is lost but not materially destroyed may be discovered by accident at a later time in attics and other obscure depots, or eventually be dug up again by more systematic archaeological search (Assmann, 2008).

A problem that we find in (cultural) memory studies is that theoretical approaches dealing with cultural memory look at memory through media and not where memory work does take place. Jan Assmann states, that memory does not take place in groups and that cultural memory on the other hands has its specialists and carriers of memory in priests, shamans, bards, clerks, scholars. Cultural memory manifest itself through monuments, museums, libraries, archives and other mnemonic institutions. Cultural

memory is organized and created by a group's need for identity. Another problem is that cultural memory has its tendency towards top down views on agency.

I want to make an argument, that we can study the 19th Century, and especially literature and canonization processes in another mode, that proposed by the tradition by Assmann, going back to Nora and Halbwachs and the Durkheimian view on the social and the collective aspect of memory, that is behind his strong concept of seeing memory as living and history as a objectified tradition. Rather we can see processes of canonization and memory politics take place in archives as well. The 19th Century is not a steady archive of a national canon and the writing of national histories, sooner to loose it's meaning in the late 20th Century as stated by Huyssen and Nora. The 19th Century is to be seen as a dynamic era, where memory played a central role in the building of nations and collective and individual identity. This is the starting point in analysis of national hero's. When we are dealing with memorial sites and places it is useful to look at them in a context (Adriansen, 2010). The memory sites often are placed in what I will call the "Bermuda triangle" between the use of history, memory politics and the formation of identity (or even identity politics).

The National Stereotypes of National Hero's

The other paradigm is the field of imagology, it is the study of how cultural and literary stereotypes emerge and how they are determined by historical and ideological circumstances as literary and discursive conventions. We see how older images often have survived in new ones and stereotypes can change into self-identity. As we see in the creation of early national stereotypes and a palimpsest trope.

In order to do so, we will follow the palimpsest as we see it in three images in three periods.

1. In the hetro-images or the image of others.
2. In the making of a self-image. (The relation between hetro-images and self-images?).
3. How self-images are changed and were used again to make a literary canon, cultural saints and national heroes.

Here we also have background tropes, to use or relate to as for example the relation between the North and the South, centre and periphery, utopian and dystopian tropes. Often we see the national character or national stereotype being understood in relation to climate and temperament or race, physiognomy and images of exoticism and self-exoticism. The construction of national hero's follows some of the same imagological patterns, discourses and contexts as we see in the construction of a national landscape and placemaking in literature. The Hero and the image of the hero is seen in images in general clichés and they are seen in background tropes like for example The Sublime, The Picturesque and The Pastoral.

In the following I will put NP in play in relation to the third theoretical notion: cultural nationalism. I intend to show, looking at the construction of national heroes with the palimpsest figure, that national hero's follow an ancient path of early memory, even Christian memory. National heroes and cultural nationalism in the long 19th Century has shown striking analogies to a palimpsest on how "national" artists and heroes were select and celebrated.

The Bird Ballad as a Founding National Epos

The canonization of religious saints and cultural saints show some of the same patterns of confessing, martyrdom, fighting for ideas, enlightening, educating and cultivating the memory of the nation. When we look at NP as a founding figure of national culture, the image of the Tjaldur or the Oystercatcher became emblematic and later the national bird of the Faroe Islands. In the 20th Century many statues have been erected in his memory. The latest in the capital Torshavn in 1997 by the most famous Faroese sculptor. Generally we can analyse the canonisation of a national hero in some of these terms:

We see sacred places: He is commemorated in a monument where his ship was built in Suðuroy. The textual and artistic legacy of the NP ballad has been distributed and amplified through editions in editions of the corpus.

Baptisms: We have boats, streets and unions called after him.

Effigies: The body of the Cultural Saint is represented as a statue or a painting, which is displayed publicly.

Icons: The face of the Cultural Saint is massively or mechanically reproduced on banknotes, coins, stamps, postcards etc. NP is on the 50 kr. banknote.

Hagiography: Biographies, children's books, plays, radio- and television programs, movies, web-sites, etc. The Book by Dr. Jacobsen from 1912 is a good example.

Mantras: From quotations and images. NP is for example seen in a Faroese stamp from 2004. The stamp is made to a poem on NP by J.H.O. Djurhuus the most famous Faroese poet in the 20th century commemorating NP death as a hero.

Indoctrination: The story of him is told and retold from kindergarten to a post-doc level. Through hagiography, mantras, pilgrimage, etc. Also the story of him has never been undertaken a critical survey.

Tradition: We see many examples of intertextual relations to the corpus of the Cultural Saint.

Desacralization: The image and the legacy of the Cultural Saint are recycled for another purpose outside of the nationalistic framework, i.e. for parody and commercial purposes. Paradoxically, this only reinstates and reinforces the important status of the Cultural Saint.

This leads to a canonization into a national pantheon. The canonization of NP made him an integral part of the national identity formation of the young Faroese nation, starting with the lectures and the book by Dr. Jacobsen.

His martyrdom was made into something sacral as we see in the stamp. And as we see in the statue from 1997, where he is also a visionary, looking out a far for a new utopian future for the Faroe Islands.

The imagology of NP the image of the Faroese is very much created in an anti-Danish counter discourse, or this is the reception of the figure where the original meaning of the "Bird's Ballad" has been overwritten as a palimpsest. This leads to the figure

related to the one in the “Bird Ballad” being both a hero and a victim at the same time. Therefore the image of NP as a hero and as a leading part of the Faroese self-image ambivalent, as both visionary utopian and as a persecuted victim. The imagology or national stereotypology also makes a personification of the Oystercatcher as the hero – while the Raven is the villain. Out of this we, as stated before, get the national bird.

Imagology, Palimpsest, Memory

To sum up and conclude.

Memory is entangled, we see nationalists overtake older hero's in a palimpsest way. They erase the old meaning and overwrite it with a new story, but we still can grasp the contours of the old. NP was a nationalist in 1808, as Jacobsen later claimed; maybe he just wanted to be a merchant?

The romantic fascination and historiography on NP follows the general romantic poetics and aestheticism. This outlook on history is preoccupied with loss, the work of mourning, and the metaphysics of recompense. We see this in for example Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe, Hoffmann, Schlegel, etc. (Møller, 2011). Romantic poetics, painting and aesthetics in general are profoundly connected to the notion of memory. Walther Benjamin's famous “Ursprung der deutschen Trauerspiels”, expands on the ruin as an allegory: “Allegroien sin dim Reiche der Gedanken was Ruinen im Reiche der Dingen”(Benjamin, 1974, p. 354 (I)). If we compare the short life of NP with the look on memory as we see in the fascination with ruins, Benjamin states that the ruin relates to the world of things or material culture as we might call it today, as the allegory to the thought. In this way he tries to understand the ruin as a material phenomena and melt it together with the linguistic figure of the allegory (Steinskog, 2000, p. 36). In the romantic age the trope of loss, as seen in the ruin-gaze combines the dream of golden ages and therefore combines both idealism, rebellion, nostalgia and sublimity with a modern project of individualization and desire. In Benjamin's text, the ruin is both a figure of loss and of the loss of an epistemological wholeness.

The ruins are fragments of a shattered world, parts of the loss of wholeness⁴.

Hero worship in itself is ancient and not something that was invented in the age of nationalism. Like the idealization of the past, as we see in the ruin, the look on a national hero can be double, since national hero's like NP can be understood as an allegory. He connects to the notion of loss and also the dream of a golden age. In this way the canonization of NP combines idealism, rebellion, nostalgia and the sublime with a modern project of individualization and desire at the same time.

Heroic, mythological and legendary figures are often seen as founders of communities (Calzoni, 2007). We can remember heroes like Jason, Achilles, Odysseus and in our more secular times the heroes in national foundation sagas (as The Faroe Saga) other images are elevated to put real persons close to divinity and make these persons the embodiment of a societies political and moral ideals. Many of these secular or national hero-figures originate from oral culture and from the communities collective memory and literary archive. Examples here are Beowulf, Sigfried (Sjúrður) and later Robin Hood and Wilhelm Tell reflecting national self-images as well as the later more allegorical figures like Britannia, Marianne and Germania. NP is very much a key figure in the foundation of the Faroese nation and his "Bird Ballad" is a national epos.

It has been suggested, that we are to see the "Bird Ballad" and NP's life in what he became in memory. As for example to see him and his ballads in a postcolonial view. I do not agree with this line of thought, because it confuses the historic figure with the reception of him. This is sometimes referred to as 'the rear view mirror on history'. (Kosselleck, 1985). Instead of a postcolonial 'writing back', I see NP's "Bird Ballad" in the geometric terms of centre and periphery, that can help us understand cultural geography and social power relations. The relationship between the periphery and the

⁴ There is a striking resemblance between Benjamin and the French historian Pierre Nora, when he on the relationship between history and memory states: "*With the appearance of the "trace", of distance and meditation, however, we leave the realms of true memory and enter that of history*" (Nora, 1996, p. XV-XLII). Here memory represents loss: "*... ancient bond of identity has been broken*" (Ibid.p. 2). Commemorations and memorials – and the celebration of ruins for that matter - are ritualized and have a weak connection to reality. In Nora's view we speak about memory, because we have lost the connection to it, this is a genuine romantic and a melancholic notion. Paul Ricoeur repeats Nora's and the line of thought from Benjamin, that memory : "*Torn away, terminated, completed, a past definitively dead: so many words that express disappearance.*" (Ricoeur, 2004, s. 402).

centre is not only a spatial, but has to do with power and prestige (Leerseen, 2007, p. 279).

When we look at literature and national poetry in relation to nationalism. National poets are or became public figures, which understood to mediate a sense of a national pain, that may stimulate or creative national hopes (Aberbach 1996). They had aims such as independence, unity, power, recognition, so national poets often convey not just an image of stable national identity but also its opposite: weak identity, which gives an edge of desperation to national assertion. NP is prior to the typical national poet, but the reception of him has turned him into a national poet. If we look into, what a national poet is, there is a tendency for these poets to identify with a wounded, weak, humiliated nation as we see in the “Bird’s Ballad”. Generally national poetry expresses grievance and rage at an imperial or colonial oppressor, which might inspire cultural revival and also lead to violence. Humiliation to some extent can define national identity. Poetry is often part of the process of confronting and mastering the past (Aberbach, 2003).

The emergence of a Faroese-self image as we seen in the sites of memory commemorating NP are to be understood as a part of a struggle for prestige and recognition (Honneth). The “Bird Ballad” projects a trope of both patriotism and of satire at the same time. All in all we see positive self-images and hetro-images mix at this point. This fuels the memory politics in creating a historical consciousness and holding together of an imagined community and a Faroese identity. In this way cultural heritage becomes a subsection of the use of history and the master narrative of victimhood.

NP’s bird poem has also been overwritten and used to create new images and memory politics. All the way from literature to the national bird and also the most used trope by Faroese nationalists being a victim. The problem with the role of the victim is of course the lack of agency.

Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney see literature as a medium of remembrance, and images of the past as well. Rigney states that literature is also an object of remembrance as well as the medium for observing the production of cultural memory. We see this with

NP's "Bird Ballad". Rigney treats texts not only as a media of remembrance, but also as forms of expression of recollection in other media (Erl1 & Rigney, 2009). With NP and his Bird Ballad we see many media overtake the story as a palimpsest in itself. Fictional narratives do recycle earlier forms of remembrance and can be seen as 'relay stations' in the circulation of memories. In this I hope I have showed how the use of the national hero NP has been mediated and remediated and changed throughout time: